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# The Power of Peers



A Guide to Developing a Peer Support Program for Students with Disabilities

[www.FloridaInclusionNetwork.com](http://www.FloridaInclusionNetwork.com)



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# Introduction



Students: Our Most Valuable Resource

## Students: Our Most Valuable Resource

Florida students with disabilities, particularly those with more significant disabilities, face many challenges to taking part in the school community. Students with disabilities may require extra help with the regular education curriculum, with transitions from activity to activity, and in dealing with social issues and peer pressure. The conventional model for providing the extra help needed by these students is to use exceptional student education (ESE) teachers, paraprofessionals, and other support personnel.<sup>1</sup> But while the model is effective,<sup>2</sup> using paid adults as the *only* option for support can be limiting<sup>3</sup> for several reasons.

One reason is that, although students with disabilities need qualified personnel and services, they may not *always* require the services of specialized professionals.<sup>4</sup> Inclusive education presents many challenges for special education staff as they try to support students with complex schedules and needs. Utilizing all available resources is a necessity for most schools.

Another reason is that “adult-reliant” support models can actually increase the isolation and dependency of students with disabilities, especially those with moderate to severe disabilities. When adults hover around a student, it can be a barrier to relationships with same-aged peers without disabilities.

Support from adults in the school is by definition a temporary service. The goal for all students, with and without disabilities, is to become independent. How will students with disabilities manage their lives when they leave school? Learning how to access natural supports and develop positive relationships with peers is an important part of the answer.

How can schools meet the increased need to support students with disabilities in inclusive settings? One cost-effective, natural and underutilized answer is PEERS: students providing support to students with disabilities.

Students with and without disabilities can benefit from a formal peer support program. Research shows these programs can lead to (a) higher student achievement, (b) increased self-esteem, (c) improved behavior, (d) increased attendance, and, most importantly, (e) the development of positive relationships between students with and without disabilities in the school and community.<sup>5 6</sup>

A peer support program benefits staff as well. General education teachers say they spend less time assisting students with routine tasks, such as following directions, staying on task, and writing homework assignments. Special education personnel say the peer support programs let them use time more effectively to help students and general education colleagues through planning, consulting, and co-teaching.

Although the research data are important, educators, parents, and students find that many benefits are beyond measure. Students serving as peer assistants are finding new meaning in school activities, even students at-risk of dropping out of school. Students with disabilities are finding increased acceptance and understanding at school.<sup>7</sup> Using peers to support one another creates a cooperative classroom community where all students have value and rely on one another.<sup>8</sup>

The story of Terrell is happily typical of what a peer support program can do. Terrell is 13 years old and has cerebral palsy and mental retardation. Terrell cannot speak and uses a laptop computer for communicating, but he had few opportunities to use it with the other students in his self-contained classroom. His teachers felt that in the general education classroom, he could take part in more of the regular curriculum and increase his social interactions. But the support he needed was more than the general education teachers could provide.

The answer was to match him with peers in each of his six classes, with periodic help from his ESE teacher. The peers did some reading for him, took notes for him, and reminded him of what he was supposed to be doing. They took on this responsibility as part of an elective class where they also learned about disability issues and how to carry out support in a scientific way. The effect on Terrell was tremendous. He started using his communication device regularly to communicate with classmates and to take part in class discussions. He kept up with assignments and did well on modified tests.

But the best picture of success might be seen in Terrell's transitions between classes. There is Terrell moving through the noisy exuberance of the middle school hallway in his motorized wheelchair, his peer assistant by his side. They wave to classmates, friends lean over to share a joke or piece of news. From relative isolation, Terrell has moved into the life of his school. It has benefited him and his classmates both. And it was made possible by a well-planned peer support program.

Elementary and secondary schools throughout Florida are tapping into the power of peers to help students with disabilities benefit from inclusive education. This guide is for educators and families who want to start a peer support program in their own school. All materials found in this guide are included in the accompanying CD. Section 1 describes the contents of the guide.

For more information on starting a peer support program on your campus, please contact your local Florida Inclusion Network (FIN) facilitator by visiting the FIN website, [www.FloridaInclusionNetwork.com](http://www.FloridaInclusionNetwork.com), and clicking on "About Us," then clicking on "Our Staff" to find the facilitator for your district. Your FIN facilitator can provide you with current information, planning assistance, and ongoing support needed to make the peer support program successful in your school!

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# Section 1



How to Use This Guide

## Using This Guide

**Section 1:** This section describes the resources in the guide and how to use them. This guide has been designed to assist education teams in the design and implementation of peer support programs in schools throughout Florida. While a peer support program may be new to your school, there is nothing new about students helping students. The peer support program simply formalizes the idea. This guide provides you with a process and materials to create a peer support program in your school. You are encouraged to adapt these materials for your own situation.

A peer support program matches students with disabilities with peers who assist them during instructional and noninstructional activities throughout the day. Students may be paired for cooperative learning, group projects, or activities. Peer assistants can be almost any age, from any social, ethnic, or cultural background. They do not have to be the best students. In fact, peer assistants with academic or social problems have been known to blossom as they learn to help fellow students with disabilities. A good peer assistant has empathy, patience, commitment, and a desire to help others.

The first step in planning a peer support program on your campus is to find partners. People who might be interested include guidance counselors, special education teachers, general education teachers, paraprofessionals, support services personnel, vocational or electives teachers, administrators, and parents. Your team could be as small as two people. A general education teacher and a special education teacher might make a good pair. It is better to have a small committed group than a larger one that won't be able to last for the long haul. However, it is not a good idea for one person to try to develop a program alone.

This guide takes you through the process of developing a peer support program independently. However, we hope you will make use of the Florida Inclusion Network in the process. Representatives from FIN can help you organize your team and provide valuable resources to help you get started. FIN can arrange for visits to schools with successful peer support programs, can provide staff training, and may even provide stipends to compensate staff for the extra time needed at the beginning of the program.

**Section 2:** This section is the “facilitator’s guide” for training your peer support program team. Make sure to give adequate time and attention to section 2. It provides a detailed outline of training sessions for the facilitator to use, as well as instructions for team building exercises to introduce each session. Even if your team has been through the FIN training on peer supports, it is a good idea to review this material. This section contains the PowerPoint slides for use in team training. These can also be printed as overheads if that is more convenient for you.

**Section 3:** This section provides a detailed description of each program development step. There is also a useful planning chart for your team to use.

**Section 4:** This section provides ideas for peer assistant training, including a training outline, content, and timeframes.

**Section 5:** This Section has appendices that include samples of forms, letters, and documentation tools, along with other critical information designed to facilitate successful implementation of the program.

**Section 6:** This section contains recommended resources and references to help with your peer support program.

You don’t need to reinvent the peer support wheel. There are many resources in Florida and nationally to help you learn of the challenges and successes in other programs. The Florida Inclusion Network is ready to be your partner in this effort.

Visit the FIN website to find the contact person for your district:  
[www.FloridaInclusionNetwork.com](http://www.FloridaInclusionNetwork.com)

# Section 5



Appendices

This section has appendices that include samples of forms, letters, documentation tools, and other critical information designed to facilitate successful implementation of the program.

# Section 5

## Appendices

**The following documents can be found in this section:**

**Appendix A:** Sample Vision Statement, Core Beliefs, and Guiding Principles

**Appendix B:** Team Process for Developing a Vision Statement

**Appendix C:** Sample Peer Assistant Eligibility Criteria (secondary and elementary)

**Appendix D:** Sample Program Advertising Flyer

**Appendix E:** Sample Peer Assistant Application/Parent Permission Form (secondary and elementary)

**Appendix F:** Sample Peer Assistant Teacher Recommendation Form

**Appendix G:** Sample Letter to Parents (secondary and elementary)

**Appendix H:** Sample Peer Assistant Grading System & Log (secondary)

**Appendix I:** Florida Middle and High School Course Codes

**Appendix J:** Peer Assistant Weekly Log

**Appendix K:** Surveys and Program Evaluation Tools

**Appendix L:** Student Information Tool

## APPENDIX A

### SAMPLE VISION STATEMENT

Our school is a place where students recognize, accept, and value each other's differences and commonalities and are supportive of and supported by the whole school community.

### SAMPLE CORE BELIEFS

- The peer support program expands all possible academic, behavioral, social, and learning opportunities.
- The presence of students with disabilities in the general education classroom provides learning opportunities and experiences that are beyond those of the general education curriculum.
- Friendships develop between students with disabilities and their typical peers in inclusive settings.
- Peer assistants and students with disabilities benefit both educationally and socially from their interactions in the general education classroom.

### SAMPLE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- The needs of *all* program participants will be considered by the team.
- All students will have opportunities to share their unique gifts with others.
- All team members will use person-first language.
- All students will be included in discussions and decisions that are about them.
- All students will participate in an age-appropriate curriculum; social learning may be the primary goal for some.
- All students will be provided with a functional system of communication at all times.
- All students will help solve problems about behaviors or situations as they arise.