

# Peer Support and Peer Networks: Tips for School Staff



## What is the Kentucky Peer Support Network Project?

Our school is participating in the Kentucky Peer Support Network Project. The goal of the project is to increase inclusive activities and provide the opportunity for friendships between students with and without disabilities in our school and community.

Research tells us that making friends can be especially hard for students with significant disabilities. Peer Support Arrangements and Peer Networks can help foster relationships by bringing students together!

Administered by Kentucky Department of Education and the regional Special Education Cooperatives, the Kentucky Peer Support Network Project helps schools throughout the state set up Peer Support Arrangements and Peer Networks for their students.

Peer Support Arrangements and Peer Networks involve

identifying and equipping a group of peers to provide ongoing support to individual students with significant disabilities in or outside of the classroom.

### Peer Support Arrangements

Within *inclusive classrooms*, Peer Support Arrangements train peers (usually 2-3) to provide academic and social support to each other during ongoing learning activities for a *specific class or classes*.

### Peer Networks

*Beyond the classroom*, a group of peers (usually 3-6) form a Peer Network together with a student with a significant disability to help foster social connections and friendships between classes, at lunch, in extracurricular activities, or

beyond the school day. School staff facilitate these groups, which usually meet weekly, to ensure their success.

How will YOU help?

*Friendships matter. However, friendships and a sense of belonging are often elusive for youth with disabilities. Our school and community are better when EVERYONE has an opportunity to participate.*

## How can I help?

- Volunteer to **facilitate a Peer Network** once a week (typically no more than 30 minutes).
- **Welcome students** with significant disabilities in your classroom; facilitate Peer Support Arrangements with other students in the classroom.
- **Help train peers** to provide supports in general education classrooms or to be part of Peer Networks.
- **Foster friendships** between students with and without disabilities.
- Make sure clubs/activities that you sponsor are **welcoming for all!**
- **Keep ALL parents informed** of what their students are doing and opportunities for ALL students to be part of the life of our school (both academically and beyond).
- **Share our stories!** The Kentucky Peer Support Network Project is collecting success stories and photos of our students learning and having fun together.
- **Invite parents to events!** (see more ideas for Parent Engagement on page 2)

## For More Information

Contact the Low Incidence Consultant at your regional Special Education Cooperative for support in implementing Peer Support Arrangements and Peer Networks in your school!

<https://education.ky.gov/specialed/excep/advgroup/Pages/Kentucky's-Educational-Cooperatives-Special-Education-Services.aspx>



## KY Peer Support Network website and Facebook page

For more information about this statewide effort, check out the project website: <http://www.kypeersupport.org/>

The Kentucky Peer Support Network Project also has a Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/kypeersupportnetwork?ref=hl>

## What About Grades?

Some parents worry that if their child participates in Peer Support Arrangements in academic classes, their grades may suffer. However, just the opposite is true.

Research conducted by Dr. Erik Carter, of Vanderbilt University, shows that students who were A or B students continued to do very well in their classes when they provided peer supports. And most surprisingly, students who themselves were just getting by or even struggling in a class raised their grades by over a full letter grade in classes where they supported a peer with a significant disability!

**Together we can make a difference in the lives of ALL our school's students!**



## The Power of Parent Engagement

The National PTA Standards, which came out in 1994, states "Over 30 years of research has proven beyond dispute the positive connection between parent involvement and student success. Effectively engaging parents and families in the education of their children has the potential to be far more transformational than any other type of education reform." (Amy Pleet, 2000).

### Ideas for Involving Parents

- **Keep parents in the loop** about what is going on both academically and socially within the school. Consider multi-modal communication (e.g., email, snail mail, phone call and/or flyers sent home).
- **Plan an event for families** of participating students with and without disabilities at the school or other community location, for parents to meet each other and support friendships and inclusive activities for their children.
  - Meet and Greet
  - Family Game Night
  - Involve food! – Family & Friends Breakfast or Lunch, Chili Cook-off, Potluck Dinner, etc.
  - Family Bowling
- Find a way for students receiving Peer Support and in Peer Networks to **be involved in an existing/planned school event**, such as a family night for the entire school, awards programs, plays, talent shows, sporting events, etc. Extend personal invitations to families.
- **Service Learning Activity (in which students work together to do something to help their community)** – invite families to participate, or for kickoff and/or closing event.
- **End of Year Celebration** – can encourage friendships to continue over the summer!

## Online Modules on Natural Peer Supports

<http://www.pattan.net/Videos/Browse/Training%20Series/Starting+Points+and+Possibilities+Promoting+Inclusion+Learning+and+Relationships+for+Students+with+Complex+Needs>.

These five modules, featuring our project consultant, Dr. Erik Carter, address developing structures in schools that promote inclusion, learning, and relationships between students with and without disabilities. This may be good viewing for school staff to learn more about how natural peer supports could be helpful in the classroom and beyond. Modules are 16 to 32 minutes long.

<http://www.engagingalllearners.ca/sal/peer-mentoring/>

This is a series of 11 very short videos on natural peer support (one to five minutes), also featuring our consultant, Dr. Carter.