

PEER MENTORS CHANGING THE CULTURE OF SCHOOLS

How We Increase Inclusion and Acceptance

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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety,
Improving Instruction, Managing Resources,
Closing the Gap*



All I wanted in my middle school years was to be heard and accepted for just being me. I needed to build the confidence to live in my own skin, and to learn to step forward instead of following others. Middle school is such an unsure time for all kids, it's a time of self discovery, for figuring out who they are, and figuring out what they believe in. It's our job as educators to support this growth and to inspire them to continue to find themselves.

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I am lucky enough to work at a Washington state middle school that fosters a culture of acceptance and inclusion. At Washington Middle School in Olympia, we choose to focus on the acceptance of all students. With the support of my amazing administration and wonderful staff who were willing to try things “outside the box,” we implemented a peer mentor program that is changing the lives of students — all students.

My classroom is a special education self-contained middle school classroom. In real people terms, this means the students attend one or two general education classes, and the rest of their day is spent with me focusing on IEP goals. We work on time telling, counting money, and learning their personal information, all life skills and functional academics. One of the most important aspects of my job is to connect my students to the school. To help create a support network around them. This ensures that as they travel from one grade to the next — and one school to the next

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— they continue to have friendships and people who know and care about them. All students deserve a fair opportunity to have friends and be integrated with their peers.

Our peer mentors are general education students who have one period of Peer Mentoring in place of an elective. Students pull into my classroom, a practice called Backwards Mainstreaming. They work with special education students all six periods of the day. Peer mentors receive instruction from the special education teacher to run curriculum, take data, and support sensory needs. Many of my students with special needs would not otherwise have access to general education peers throughout the school day due to the severity of overarching social, adaptive and academic deficits. Backwards Mainstreaming knocks down the barriers and opens doors of opportunity for my students.

There are countless benefits. Kids form bonds far beyond those of typical middle school friendships. The peer mentors aren't just teaching academics, but also the social skills all middle school students need to survive and fit in. All special education students feel included in the school community and are known throughout the hallways and even into the extended community.

Since we started this program, my students' academic scores have all increased, some by double. Their behaviors have decreased, and they are learning social skills by observing and interacting with general education peers. These peers help provide the models of what middle school behavior should look like. My students' parents are even reporting greater interactions within

the community with fellow WMS students.

I wasn't expecting is the positives for the peer mentors, but it's been a wonderful side effect. As a school, we see increased leadership skills, confidence, and more of a connection to school from the mentors. I accept and train all students who ask to be a peer mentor; there is no interview or selection process. This includes students with attendance issues, students with behavior struggles, and students with mental illnesses. This class gives them a connection to school and a safe place to just be themselves.



Melissa Charette's Peer Mentoring program at Washington MS pairs general education students with special education students, teaching what she calls “functional academics” — things that make students as independent as possible later in life.

The peer mentors begin to build friendships that are genuine and real. The entire culture at WMS has changed. Because of the number of students working within this classroom daily, staff and students have really come to know and understand my students.

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My students' behaviors that look "different" around school are now commonplace and accepted. Communication methods such as sign language, use of technology, or pictures that are sometimes a struggle outside of the classroom have been learned and implemented school wide.

Recently, I had the parent of one of my students come to me at school with tears in her eyes and a huge stack of birthday invitations. As she handed them to me I asked her why she was crying. She said her student had never been able to have a birthday party because there had never been anyone to invite. And now she said these 50 cards may not be enough. As a parent, I can't imagine the feeling your son or daughter has no friends and is alone in the school. All students deserve to have friends.

This program is successful because my students are truly a part of the WMS community. They come to school dances, they are high-fived in the hallways, they run track, and they love school. The peer mentor class is

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now the "cool" class to take. The first year I had three peer mentors, last year I had forty six peer mentors, and this year I have over one hundred peer mentors signed up to work in my classroom. In addition to fostering academic growth in our students, we need to grow good human beings. Students who are compassionate and care about those around them are that much more equipped with 21st century job skills.

Through all my awkwardness in middle school, I would have greatly benefited from this program. It would have not only increased the confidence I was lacking, it would have also introduced me much earlier to the profession that is my passion. Having the hands-on experience with special needs students would have

opened that door and given me more of a pathway and focus through high school and into college.

This program doesn't cost anything but time – the time to set up the schedule and time to train the peer mentors. It shifted the culture of our school and the hearts of our students. Wouldn't it be wonderful if every student across the state was able to put themselves in another person's shoes?

It doesn't matter if kids are special education students or general education students. All students deserve friends. All students deserve a space they feel safe in. All students deserve acceptance. A peer mentor program in your school can make this a reality for all of your students. ■

Watch Washington Middle School's Peer Mentor Program video at <http://bit.ly/wms-peer-mentor>. While you're at it, subscribe to our YouTube channel so you never miss a video.

