

Outcomes for LINKS



Benefits of Peer-to-Peer Support

Schools are faced with increasing pressure to address the academic needs of a variety of students, including those with disabilities, students who are not diagnosed with disabilities but who are considered to be at-risk, as well as those who are average and high-achieving. Peer support programs offer potential benefits to all participants. Students with disabilities learn age-appropriate behaviors through observing peer models, they practice skills in natural contexts, and have more consistent access to the general education curriculum. Average and high-achieving peers have the opportunity to teach skills to others. Through teaching, they are able to solidify and enhance their learning, and they may gain increased skills in a number of areas, including organization, responsibility, problem solving, decision-making, and accountability (Carter, Cushing & Kennedy, 2009).

Perhaps no group stands to gain as much as those who are at-risk. Without intervention, this group is vulnerable to many negative school outcomes, including academic failure, detention, suspension, and drop-out.

"I think it would greatly benefit the world if everyone got to work in a program like LINKS for at least a semester. If high school students did, I think we would all be a lot more understanding, accepting, and kind." LINK Peer

LINK Outcomes Study

During the 2012-2013 school-year, staff from the START project conducted a study with four High Schools in Michigan where Peer-to-Peer support programs were implemented. School professionals recorded academic and behavioral data for their peer support, or LINK students, during the semester prior to their participation in the program, as well as in the first semester they supported a student with ASD.

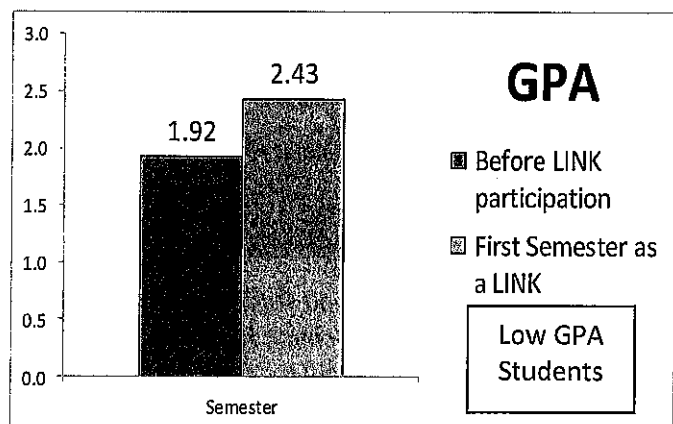
Outcomes for all LINK Students

Data for the 122 LINK students who were evaluated for this study suggested that LINKs had higher GPAs and fewer absences in the semester where they participated as a peer support for a student with ASD. The average GPA for these students before becoming a LINK was 2.99, while the average GPA in their first semester as a LINK was 3.17. Students averaged 5.39 days absent before becoming a LINK, and 4.11 days absent in their first semester as a LINK.

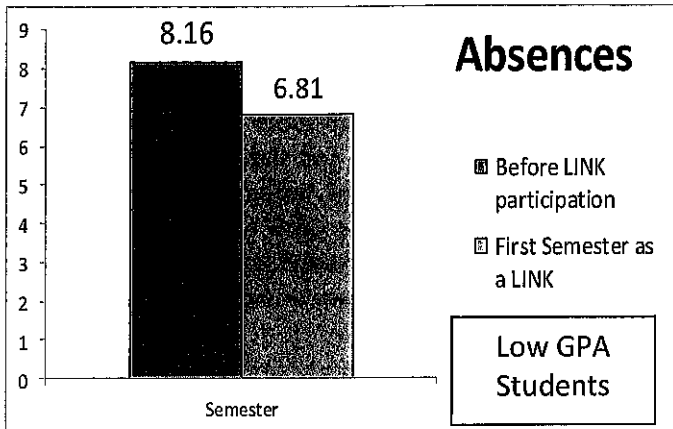
In the START LINK outcomes study, 23 of 29 LINK students, or nearly 80% of those identified as at risk, showed improvements in GPA in the semester they first participated as a peer support.

Outcomes for Low GPA LINK Students

From these 122 LINK students, we also identified a subgroup of 29 individuals who were considered to be at-risk based on having a low initial GPA, i.e., a GPA below 2.5. Data for these 29 LINK students were then analyzed separately. Nearly 80% of participants showed improvements in GPA in the first semester they participated as a peer support. Prior to participating as LINKs, the average GPA for this group was 1.92, however during the first semester they began supporting students with ASD, their GPAs increased to 2.43. On average, these at-risk students moved from a C average to a B- average in the equivalent of one semester.



Positive outcomes were also found related to school absences. Before participating in the LINK program, at-risk students averaged 8.16 absences per semester. They had fewer absences in the first semester they participated as a LINK, averaging 6.81 missed school-days.



Conclusion

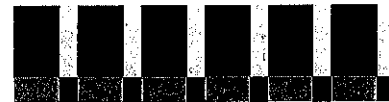
Peer-to-Peer Support programs provide critical opportunities to bring together students with a range of needs, and these programs can lead to academic, social and behavioral benefits for all participants. Both peer supports and students with ASD learn new skills, engage in social opportunities, and have interactions that, over time, can contribute to meaningful changes in school climate. Participants in these programs learn new skills that move them toward employment and careers, they learn to value diversity, allowing them to be more richly involved in their communities, and they engage in social and academic experiences with more confidence and competence.



Eastern U.P. students at a LINKS event

Special thanks to the staff and students at Grand Haven High School, Haslett High School, Hemlock High School and Lapeer West High School for their participation in this project.

"For low-achieving students in particular...the opportunity to practice [academic strategies] through teaching them to others, may also promote increased engagement and learning. Students more readily acquire academic content when they must explain it to others and are responsible for ensuring another's learning" (Carter & Kennedy, 2006, p. 287).



References

- Carter, E.W., Cushing, L.S. & Kennedy, C. H. (2009). *Peer support strategies for improving all students' social lives and learning*. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing Company.
- Carter, E.W. & Kennedy, C.H. (2006). Promoting access to the general curriculum using peer support strategies. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 31, 284-292.

START

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