

Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Extracurricular Programs

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Introduction

The effective community inclusion of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities is a priority in Maryland (Maryland Executive Order No. 01.01.2013.04, 2013). Schools are a key frontier for the integration of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. One crucial method to fully include students with disabilities into their school's social environment is to facilitate their participation in extracurricular programs (Dwight 2010). These programs help students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers form valuable friendships and engage in positive interactions, which can carry over into the school day. The recent movement to develop inclusive extracurricular programs that benefit students with and without disabilities has seen the development of several program formats. This review compares three established middle and high school national extracurricular inclusion models for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and makes recommendations for schools about program selection.

Methods

The authors conducted a literature review examining inclusive extracurricular programs in middle and high schools in the United States. Both peer-reviewed studies and white papers were examined to clarify the current state of practice. Literature was gathered through searching Google Scholar, Psych Info, and PubMed, as well as communicating with program administrators. The criteria for inclusion were: (1) the literature review focused on a school-based extracurricular program to include students with intellectual and developmental disabilities; (2) the program targeted middle and high school students; (3) the program existed within the United States; (4) the study or white paper was published in the last fifteen years; and (5) the study or white paper was published in English.

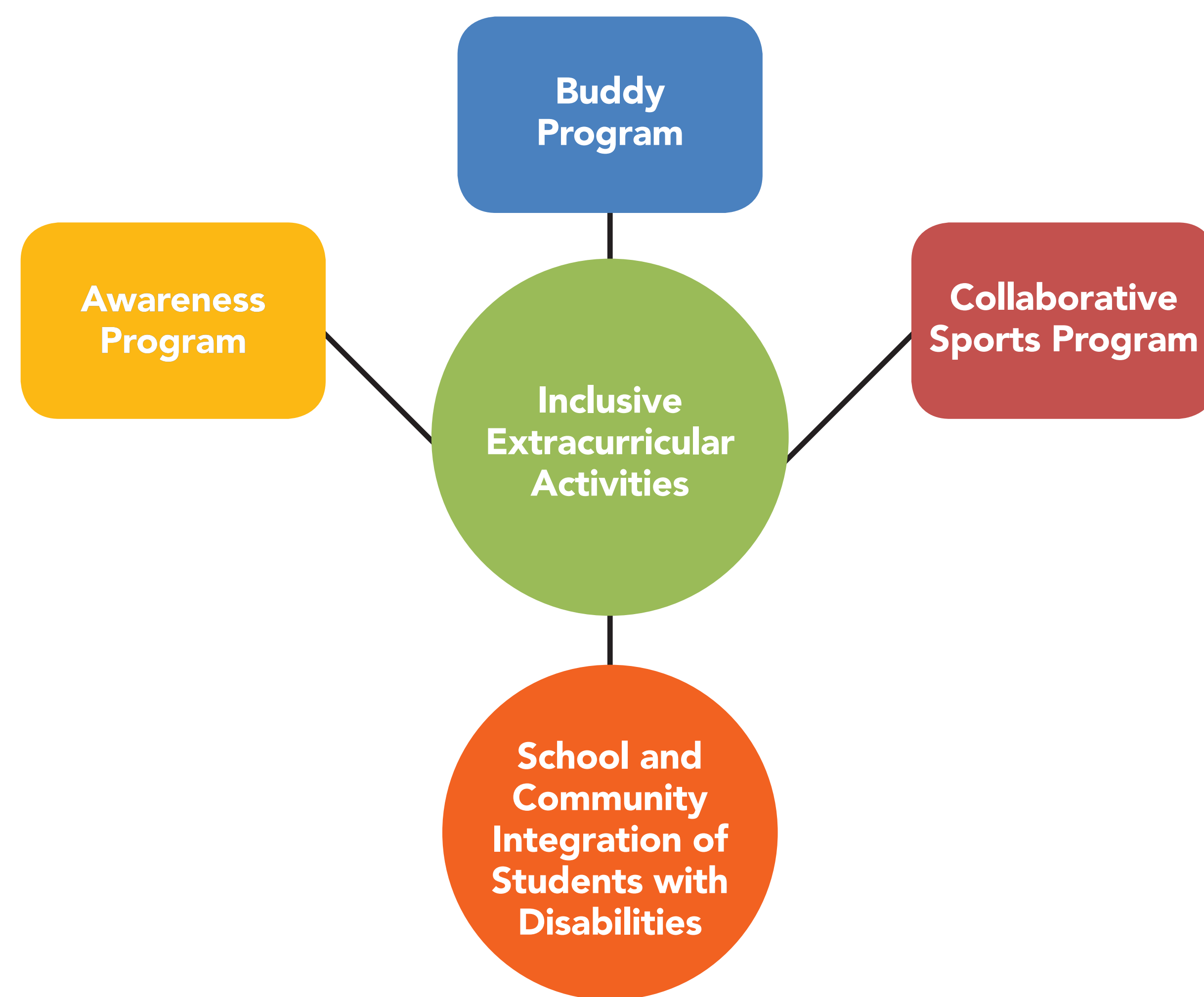


Figure 1: Relationships Among Inclusive Extracurricular Programs and Overall Integration of Students with Disabilities in their Community

Findings

The authors identified three widespread national programs as models for inclusive extracurricular programs in middle and high schools: Unified Sports, Best Buddies, and Kids on the Block/Count Me In. Each of the three programs aimed to integrate students with disabilities in different ways. Unified Sports united non-disabled students and students with disabilities as they collaborated in sports. Best Buddies facilitated peer interactions on an individual basis through social activities. Kids on the Block/Count Me




Program	Purpose	Disabilities Served	Target Age Range	Time Commitment	Cost	Strengths	Weaknesses
 Unified Sports	Facilitate friendships between students with and without developmental disabilities through group collaboration in sports activities	Developmental disabilities	Elementary, middle, and high school students	- 1.5 hours/day - Several days per week for multiple weeks	\$966 - flag football team \$1,276 - basketball team \$1,705 - soccer team	- Hands-on experience - Long-term friendship - Learn athletic and teamwork skills	- Hire instructors from outside school - Not all students with disabilities can participate - May not attract female participation
 Best Buddies	Foster friendships on an individual level between students with and without intellectual disabilities	Developmental disabilities	Elementary, middle, and high school students	- Once a week - Throughout the entire school year	\$300 dues to Best Buddies organization Varies across states Pay for cost of activities such as crafts	- One-to-one friendships allow for deeper connection - Hands-on experience - Long-term friendship	- May not promote cohesion/integration on a group level - Relies on students finding transportation
 Kids on the Block and Count Me In Programs	Both programs promote awareness of various disabilities through informative puppet shows	Developmental disabilities, physical disabilities, visual impairment, hearing impairment	Elementary and middle school students	- 45-minute show followed by 10-15 minute Q & A session - Only shown once	- Kids on the Block \$240 per presentation - Count Me In \$75 per presentation	- Minimal time commitment - Addresses physical and intellectual disabilities	- Mainly for younger children - Only occurs once, may not have lasting impact - Hire people from outside of school to do show

Figure 2: Comparison of Three Inclusive Extracurricular Programs for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

In increased awareness about disabilities among non-disabled students (Figure 1). Key differences among the programs included the purpose, type of disability served, target age range, time commitment, and cost (Figure 2).

All three studies found the inclusion programs to be effective to some degree. The Unified Sports program found a significant improvement for students with and without disabilities in self-esteem, selection of positive adjectives to describe students with disabilities, friendship, and perceived interest in making friends. Non-disabled students participating in the Best Buddies program displayed increased interaction with students with developmental disabilities, increased interest in developmental disabilities, and higher social confidence in communication with people with developmental disabilities. Similarly, students with disabilities in the Best Buddies program experienced positive social results and felt more accepted by their friends and community. The Kids on the Block/Count Me In program found small positive effects on non-disabled students' attitudes toward students with disabilities, and a small-to-medium positive effect on non-disabled students' knowledge of students with disabilities.

Discussion/Recommendations

The findings of the literature review validate and confirm the significance and positive impact of inclusive extracurricular programs in integrating students with intellectual and developmental disabilities into their school community. Several recommendations can be made based on these findings:

- Schools looking to establish a program, but worried about the cost, may want to use Kids on the Block/Count Me In presentations, because these programs are the least expensive of the three studied.
- Schools that can afford resource-intensive programs and already have an established sports infrastructure may prefer to start a Unified Sports program.
- Schools that have undertaken disability awareness campaigns in the past may wish to implement Best Buddies and Unified Sports programs. These programs build on awareness by directly facilitating interactions and collaboration between students with and without disabilities.
- Schools looking for the most sustainable program may want to implement a peer buddy program, such as Best Buddies, which is relatively inexpensive and requires little help from outside professionals.
- High schools will be best served by implementing Best Buddies or Unified Sports programs because these programs are appropriate for students of all ages. In comparison, since Kids on the Block/Count Me In involved the use of puppets, it may be more appropriate for younger students.

Conclusions

- This review had several limitations: (1) there was no fixed list of search terms to find studies about inclusive programs; (2) only one or two studies were examined for each program due to limited publications; and (3) due to differences in the studies' evaluation criteria, there was no standardized way to compare the programs' effectiveness.
- Future research should directly compare the effectiveness of extracurricular programs using standardized measures. Additionally, research should examine inclusive programs that are part of the school curriculum, as well as programs that target elementary or young adult populations.

References

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