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.

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 programs, because these programs are the least expensive of the three studied.
- Schools that can afford resource-intensive programs and already have an establishment 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 or 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 involves the use of puppets, it may be more appropriate for younger students.

Conclusion
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.

References

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 In presentations, because these programs are the least expensive of the three studied.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Disabilities Served</th>
<th>Target Age Range</th>
<th>Time Commitment</th>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unified Sports</td>
<td>Facilitate friendships between students with and without developmental disabilities through group collaboration in sports activities</td>
<td>Developmental disabilities</td>
<td>Elementary, middle, and high school students</td>
<td>1.5 hours/day - Several days per week for multiple weeks</td>
<td>$66 - Flag football team</td>
<td>- Hands-on experience</td>
<td>- May not promote collaboration on a group level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Buddies</td>
<td>Foster friendships on an individual level between students with and without intellectual disabilities</td>
<td>Developmental disabilities</td>
<td>Elementary, middle, and high school students</td>
<td>Once a week - Throughout the entire school year</td>
<td>$300 dues to Best Buddies organization</td>
<td>- One-to-one friendships allow for deeper connections</td>
<td>- Relies on students finding transportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids on the Block and Count Me In Programs</td>
<td>Both programs promote awareness of various disabilities through informative puppet shows</td>
<td>Developmental disabilities, physical disabilities, visual impairments, hearing impairments</td>
<td>Elementary and middle school students</td>
<td>45-minute show followed by 10-15 minute Q &amp; A session</td>
<td>$240 per presentation</td>
<td>- Minimal time commitment</td>
<td>- May not be more appropriate for younger students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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