

# Peer Support and Student Leadership Programs

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***Peer support and student leadership programs provide the structure for students to do the following:***

- Help other students individually or in small groups
- Provide support in a variety of ways for the entire student population
- Improve the spirit and climate of the school for students and staff
- Enhance their own capabilities and self-esteem

This booklet reports on specific programs that are examples of successful peer support and student leadership programs from Kindergarten through Grade 12. Together, they illustrate a variety of program models which can be used or adapted to meet students' needs and accommodate school and community characteristics.

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“Someone to Talk To: Peer Helping in High School”: A Video

# *Elementary Programs*

## *A K-1 Program in a multilingual school in Ontario*

Researchers Dr. Linda Cameron and Ms. Jacqueline Karsemeyer of Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) developed an interesting peer support program for young children for whom English was not their first language. The action research project entailed having five Grade 1 children serve as “language play partners” for Kindergarten children who shared the same first language. The Grade 1 students—who volunteered to participate and had parent approval—were trained to help the younger children learn English while playing with them. For three months, these Grade 1 children spent one morning a week with their partners in the Kindergarten classroom. The researchers used videotaping, observation and interviews to study the weekly sessions.

### *Background*

This action research project was part of a larger early-intervention research program in an urban multicultural school in Ontario. The Junior Kindergarten class of 19 comprised predominantly immigrant and refugee children who between them spoke 13 different languages and represented many cultures. The children tended to be silent, mainly engaged in solitary play at the manipulative stage of development. It appeared that the Kindergarten students could benefit from regular interaction with partners who knew how to speak English and who knew how to play.

Volunteers for the Language Play Partner Program were sought from the corresponding first language and ethnic groups in the Grade 1 class. This program idea appeared promising since some of the children’s cultural backgrounds made them more accustomed to learning from peers than from adults. Further, the use of language-play partnering applies Vygotsky’s concept of scaffolding to peer interactions in an English immersion environment. In future programs, the researchers noted that they want to give more attention to matching in terms of interests, learning styles, personality types and gender, rather than only language and culture.

## ***Purpose***

While this intervention was generally aimed at supporting young ESL students in learning English and accessing the curriculum, it was also prompted by these concerns the researchers had about the children:

- Experiencing belonging in a community of learners
- Establishing and maintaining their identities
- Having opportunities to play and develop sociodrama skills
- Understanding what to do, what is going on and how to reach the teacher
- Having opportunities to play, communicate and learn

## ***Benefits***

This project supported the social, language and literacy development of the Kindergarten children. They experienced having a special friend who gave care and attention, thereby increasing their sense of self-worth. The Grade 1 partner became someone to look up to, in addition to being a model for language and play. They gained cognitively from the direct teaching of the Grade 1 partner. They learned how to use classroom materials and resources, and engaged in sociodramatic play. Social skills were further developed as the Grade 1 partner monitored and modeled these.

The Grade 1 children who served as mentors also experienced having a special friend. In caring for someone else they acquired a sense of their own worth and importance. They further developed their own communication skills, understanding of others and understanding of materials and processes as they endeavored to teach their Kindergarten partners. The experience also gave them opportunity to play themselves.

*This project description has been adapted with permission from a paper presented by Linda Cameron and Jacqueline Karsemeyer at the Canadian Society for Studies in Education in Ottawa, June 1998.*

## ***Wes Hosford School***

Lynda Ward, the counselor at Wes Hosford School, an elementary school in Sherwood Park, has been operating a peer support program for over eight years. This peer support program places an emphasis on *helping* rather than *counseling*. Students who are members of Peer Support Team learn to listen to and support the growth of fellow students. The program includes four teams: Playground Pals, Cross-Age Tutors, Buddies and Service. Students rotate across these teams during the year in order to have a broad range of experiences.

### ***Selection and training***

In this program, all Grade 6 students in the school receive the training to be Peer Support members and all are invited to participate in the Peer Support Teams. The training is provided as part of their health class and is supplemented by lunch-hour sessions in which programs are evaluated and modified. The training topics include feeling identification, reflective listening, role-playing, qualities of a helper, verbal and nonverbal communication, assertiveness, problem-solving strategies, open questioning and confidentiality. The training sessions culminate in a four-hour roundup, at which time group-building exercises continue and the peer helpers brainstorm ways to make the school a better place.

### ***Playground Pals***

When students work as Playground Pals, they sign up for either morning or afternoon responsibilities. Students serving as Playground Pals wear brightly colored vests for easy identification on the playground. This is experienced as a high-status position. As Playground Pals, students' duties are the following:

- To help organize noncompetitive activities for interested students
- To help shy or withdrawn students engage with others
- To officiate games such as soccer or basketball, if necessary
- To play with students
- To be positive role models

- To promote a safe environment
- To assist the adult supervisors if requested to do so (for example, to escort a sick or injured child to the office)

The emphasis for Playground Pals is to be *proactive* rather than *reactive*. They are not responsible for discipline. If Playground Pals notice that groups of children are inclined to start fighting or arguing when trying to play games, they would make a plan to help organize those games in a better way. For example, they pick the teams to make them more fair and officiate the game. They play with the children to model fair play, turn-taking and sportsmanship.

### ***Cross-Age Tutors***

Members of this team work as study buddies to help younger children with reading or other tasks. When working as a Cross-Age Tutor, a Peer Support Team member is partnered with a child and works with him or her at recess or lunch once or twice a week for six weeks. The Grades 1 and 2 teachers have commented on the difference this has made in the students' work.

### ***Buddies***

Buddies are matched with children who are isolated or shy for any of a variety of reasons. A Buddy will help a student to meet other children and to develop appropriate skills and strategies for friendships. For example, a Buddy might initiate a low-organization game with a shy child. Other students seeing the game would want to join in and would begin interacting with the shy child very naturally. The Buddy would slide out of the situation when they see the shy child beginning to interact comfortably with the other students. Children in need of a Buddy can identify themselves by writing their name on a paper teddy bear and putting it in a designated place. Others can also nominate a child for a Buddy.

### ***Service***

The Service Team undertakes projects that promote school spirit or provide help or assistance to the community in some way. They also assist other classes with a variety of special projects.

# *Junior High Programs*

## *Fort Saskatchewan Junior High School*

*It makes me feel very important to realize that we're representing our entire homerooms. . . . We want the other students' opinions. All their opinions are valid. We're the reps from the classes. What we do is not just what we think is good. We start bringing ideas from the homeroom to whole-school projects.*

—Peer Support Team member

For three years, Karen Baxter, a full-time aide with a nursing background, facilitated a peer support program at Fort Saskatchewan Junior High School in Fort Saskatchewan. At the commencement of the program, the school administrator expressed the hope that the activities of the peer support program would help improve school spirit. This has definitely proven to be the case. The Peer Support Team conducted many highly successful activities. Just a few examples include raising \$800 in a penny drive for the SPCA; becoming a Peace Site and making paper cranes; raising \$6,500 in a 30-hour fast for famine relief; making monthly contributions to the food bank; holding staff-appreciation lunches with special themes; and organizing a number of special days in the school.

### *Program structure*

In September each homeroom was invited to elect a class representative to be a member of the Peer Support Team. Students were encouraged to choose individuals who were approachable, good listeners and dependable, rather than those who were simply popular. In the second year of the program a number of members wanted to continue participating and were allowed to do so, though each homeroom still had the opportunity to elect a representative. Following successful events, other students often express interest in joining the Peer Support Team. Sometimes some of the previous year's Team members wish to come back and work on a particular event that they especially enjoyed organizing the year before. Mrs. Baxter suggests that an open structure that permits various kinds of joining in is a good idea.

Members of the Peer Support Team were given a training program in an overnight-retreat format using the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC) training materials. They then attended weekly planning meetings held during Monday lunch hours. Anyone who missed three meetings without excused absences was expelled from the Peer Support Team.

The entire student body was invited to complete questionnaires to offer suggestions for peer support projects and to vote for their preferred activities. In general, the kinds of activities included

- community service and fundraisers,
- special day organization,
- staff-appreciation events,
- organizational-skill tutoring to peers and
- peer tutoring prior to exams.

Mrs. Baxter found the opportunity to have another adult work with her to co-facilitate the Peer Support Team very beneficial. Between the two of them it was easier to inspire and motivate students by modeling their own energy and off-the-wall ideas.

### *Students “buying in”*

In a junior high school, there is typically concern about whether Grade 9 classes will participate enthusiastically in school projects coordinated by a peer support program. In the Fort Saskatchewan Junior High program, incentives supported a friendly, competitive spirit for participation. The procedures for food bank contributions illustrated this well. One day each month was designated as “Hat and Food Day.” Students brought in food items for the food bank and placed them in a communal shopping cart in the foyer. Once they had their hands stamped and were checked off the class lists, they were able to wear a hat for the day. A tally chart was updated monthly and hung in the foyer. At the end of June, prizes were awarded to the top three contributing classes. First prize was a half-day off for a fun activity, such as an afternoon movie, bowling or swimming. Second and third prizes were class party packs of Tim Horton donuts. Over the course of one year, the students collected over 2,500 items for the local food bank.

## ***Views of Peer Support Team members***

In a group interview with the Peer Support Team, students were asked to talk about their experiences. Here's what they said:

### ***At the September retreat, what did you learn about communication?***

- "We learned that it's good to communicate with each other."
- "Eye contact makes people feel that what they are saying is important."
- "Listening well helps people realize that what they have to say is important."
- "Communication helps us to get to know each other better."
- "We learned that stereotypes are roadblocks."
- "We learned that rumors are roadblocks. We won't say things that hurt another person. Rumors aren't good. If you don't know for sure, then don't say anything."
- "To help someone solve a problem, you have to ask the right questions. You have to ask questions without hurting their feelings. Your questions have to be open-ended instead of yes-no questions."

### ***At your September retreat, what did you learn about conflict mediation?***

- "If the problem is too big, don't try to solve it yourself. Get a teacher to help."
- "To help someone solve a problem, it's a good idea to give choices or ideas instead of telling someone what to do."
- "If someone is fighting with someone or just not getting along with them, you can help them by being a sounding board, acting like a mirror. Just try to reflect their ideas when they talk out loud to you."
- "Give hints. Don't go straight out and tell someone what to do. It can backfire if it doesn't work. They're not you. Just give them ideas, but don't tell them what to do."

### ***How has it felt to accomplish things in your community service projects?***

- "It feels good to know you're helping other people and getting others to join in this helping."
- "Helping the community revitalizes the community."

- “It makes us a team. We get closer and stronger together. It’s motivating when you have an opportunity to make something happen. Even when I leave school, I believe now that I can make things happen in the community.”
- “We are so proud of what we can do and accomplish. It makes us want to do more.”
- “When we did the Penny Drive for the SPCA, our class was really happy that we brought in the biggest amount. The person from the SPCA came and talked to us about how much it costs for food for one week for the animals. We were in the newspaper. We made the community realize what a team can do.”
- “When we became a Peace Site and made all those paper cranes, it felt nice inside. I’ll always remember it.”
- “When we worked on the famine relief and participated in the 30-hour fast to help raise money for Third World countries, we got a lot of donations, as much as we could, to help these countries. This expanded all the students’ horizons.”
- “When we organize special days like Hawaii Day, everyone in this school is happier. We get to be funny. We get to see everyone look funny. It’s not like the normal, everyday, hard-work feeling.”

***What was it like to help fellow students with their organizational skills?***

- “It gives you a chance to meet and get to know someone better.”
- “It helps us learn to deal with all kinds of personalities.”
- “It can be discouraging. You give your time and effort, and sometimes you don’t see the results right away.”
- “It helps us learn not to lose our patience easily.”
- “We learn to be more patient.”
- “We learn how to handle different personalities.”

***What was it like to do peer tutoring?***

- “In helping someone else, you also had a chance to help yourself.”
- “By giving help to someone else, you end up being more prepared yourself.”
- “You feel good because you’re helping someone else.”

***Can you imagine your school without the kinds of activities you've made happen? What would it be like? How would you be different?***

- "School would be boring. It wouldn't be as much fun."
- "The activities we did gave more spirit to the school."
- "Working in peer support gave me more self-confidence and self-esteem."
- "When we made special days, it was more relaxed. Everyone knows it's going to be a fun and exciting day. There are judges and prizes. There's more excitement."
- "We get lots of friends at school."
- "Kids don't feel so isolated when they have someone they can talk to about their problems. We can help make the school better."
- "We're more approachable because of this experience."
- "All the students feel more comfortable. They feel like they have input in the school."
- "Kids know that they can talk to you without being afraid that you will put them down."
- "I feel more involved in the school."
- "This experience helps us manage our time better."
- "We make a commitment to the group and to ourselves to do the work."
- "We've become more responsible and committed."

### ***Advice and ideas from the Program Coordinator***

- Student ownership of ideas for projects they work on is imperative.
- Trust the students. Give the responsibility to the students and let them run with it. Establish guidelines and then let them take a task from there while touching base with the Coordinator regularly.
- Keep activity ideas coming from the student body as a whole. Some students who don't want to be members have great ideas.
- In a new program, where older students have not had related program experience, figure out who the leaders are and who the reliable workers are and play on these strengths.

- Try to ensure that a new program or a new year begins with an activity that is a schoolwide success. This will inspire the group and bring in more participants.
- Remind students to keep activities simple.
- Remind students that some good activities can be short. (For example, on a “Lucky Day,” a PA announcement invites all students wearing a certain color to come to the office to receive prizes—vouchers from community fast food and movie outlets.)
- Exercise caution with previously successful events that may have become tired.
- Conduct a group evaluation of each event.
- Once an event idea is chosen, keep students involved with posters, PA announcements and other unusual and fun promotions to keep students fired up about the event.
- Consider developing an inventory of the interest and talent areas of all students in the school. This list can provide ideas for both resources and high-interest events.
- Consider using retreat-type events such as the 30-hour fast early in the school year. Diverse activities at the retreat can draw in diverse groups of students. Once there, energizers and icebreakers can support bonding in a diverse student population.

## ***Fultonvale Elementary-Junior High School***

*It seems that in giving things up you get even more back. The more responsibility I give to students, the more they will give back to me in terms of personal loyalty, willingness to help and commitment to do things I value and think are important. Not only do we not lose, we gain. But sometimes it's hard to see that in the short term.*

—James Taylor, Fultonvale Elementary-Junior High School

James Taylor has been a teacher at Fultonvale for 22 years. This rural school is a 15-minute drive south of Sherwood Park. This section provides an overview of the peer support and student service programs and practices that James Taylor has been facilitating at the school.

The school has approximately 450 students, about 220 of whom are in Grades 7, 8 and 9. In describing the programs and practices, Mr. Taylor emphasized the philosophy of beginning with the students' needs rather than school program needs. For example, they didn't begin with the idea that the school needs to have a Friendship Camp; instead they began with the recognition that the Grade 7 students didn't bond quickly because they came from three feeder schools in the district, as well as from other districts. Thus, a key organizing structure became a September Friendship Camp for all Grade 7 students and other programs and practices were built on the basis of that event. This report will describe the operation and benefits of the three key elements of the program:

- Friendship Camp
- Students' Council
- School and Community Services Option

### ***Friendship Camp***

For the past seven years, the Grade 7 students at Fultonvale have spent the third week of September in a Friendship Camp. This typically involved 75 Grade 7 students and seven counselors who were Grade 9 students. Most years, Mr. Taylor was the only teacher. Mr. Taylor observed that adults must avoid the tendency to step in and do things for students that they can do for themselves. The camp has a balance of work and play but no formal teaching is done. The play includes group challenges, innovative problem-

solving, trust activities and so on. Work includes the cooking, cleaning and setting-up of tents. The camp takes place in St. Paul at Bellevue Lake. The Legion there has a well-furnished campsite including a pavilion and heated huts with refrigerators. The Legion has a mandate to support youth, so they make the site available for a small honorarium. The Grade 7 students love the Friendship Camp experience. It's fun. They bond.

## *Counselors*

The Grade 9 students who serve as counselors for Friendship Camp plan the menus and activities for the week. They experienced the camp when they were in Grade 7, so they have strong ideas about the importance of the camp and ways to make it work well. They love the responsibility and do an excellent job. The care and interest that the counselors develop with the Grade 7 students during the camp carry over into the school and help to break down the pecking order between Grade 9 and 7 students.

The selection of counselors is conducted with great care. In March, all Grade 8 students are invited to apply for the counselor positions for the coming September. Typically, about half of the Grade 8 students apply. They complete formal written applications which include letters from external referees. The current year's Grade 9 counselors serve as the selection committee. As the first step in the selection process, names are removed from the applications and all the applications are ranked. Then the names are replaced and the ranking is discussed further. Next, all applicants are interviewed using a standard format. School administrators provide training in the interviewing process. Finally, in a simulation exercise, applicants are observed in group problem-solving with novel problems. Mr. Taylor has observed that the selection-committee members will sometimes sacrifice friendships in order to choose the best people for the counselor positions.

Through the Friendship Camp experience, the counselors learned to care for each other, care for the school program and to work well with Mr. Taylor. Whenever anything was needed in the school, the counselors could be counted on to help out. When there was no one to coach the junior girls basketball team, two of the counselors worked with one parent volunteer to do it. When a custodian

reported vandalism in the washrooms, Mr. Taylor was able to ask five counselors to supervise washrooms until the problem was solved.

Students who serve as counselors for the camp have later reported that this was the most significant experience of their time at the school. They learned how to organize projects and take responsibility. These students are typically instrumental with initiatives in the secondary schools they later attend. Some graduates report that they were not given that level of responsibility again until they were well into their 20s.

### ***Students' Council***

The seven counselors of the current year form the core of the Students' Council. One in six students from the Grades 7, 8 and 9 classes is on Students' Council. Students submit applications to be on the Council. They are not elected; instead, they are selected by a team of students and teachers. An effort is made to ensure representation from all student groups. When possible, an effort is made to select all students who apply. Application and selection are completed in the spring, with the new Grade 7 students completing their process in the fall.

After Friendship Camp in September, the Students' Council has a full day and night retreat to plan the year's activities. As outlined below, the Council is organized into three committees of 7 to 10 students who take responsibility for service, dances and special days. Each committee has two teacher facilitators. Teachers choose committees after learning which students are on each of the committees. Each committee also has a combination of Grades 7, 8 and 9 students; this facilitates participatory learning. It also means that the supervising teachers can change from year to year, but the knowledge of the committee's work is perpetuated within the group of students. The two teachers are very important supportive partners for whichever two students on a committee are currently carrying the larger responsibility for conducting meetings or organizing events. First-time leadership positions can feel isolating and frightening for students.

## ***School and Community Services Committee***

The mandate of this group is to serve community: school, municipal and international. An example of serving the school community is to organize and conduct the school assemblies for the year. This was found to work much better than having administrators and teachers conduct the assemblies and deal with disruptive students. At the municipal level, the committee made lunches for the Bissell Centre; at the international level they collect money for a child in Colombia.

## ***Dance Committee***

This committee organizes sock hops and dances for the year. Funds raised through dances provide most of the money required by the whole Students' Council, including the fall retreat and the purchase of items such as sound equipment.

## ***Special Events Committee***

This committee organizes special days such as Hat Days and Wacky Olympics. They also typically work with the Parent Advisory Council to organize a staff-appreciation lunch—securing gifts from the community, planning draws for prizes, having an MC, making decorations with a fun theme.

## ***School and Community Services Option***

This is a half-year option that was developed for the Grade 9 students. At the beginning of the course students write resumes, assess their skills and attitudes, and consider their life direction and future jobs. The course requires them to secure volunteer or paid work outside of school hours, as well as finding volunteer employment during class time: four periods every six days. The work must be evaluated in an ongoing manner by “employers.” Students can quit or be fired from these “jobs.” The students also write about what they are or are not learning in a weekly journal. Teachers in the school also post classified ads to advertise work they have to offer. Students apply and are interviewed for these jobs.

Given that students typically hope that options will be fun, Mr. Taylor has been very surprised at the strong appeal this course has for many students. He observed that many students want to be of real service and to have their work appreciated and valued. This is evident in the way they will come in at lunch or stay late in order to complete work that is needed by others.

### *Thoughts on empowerment*

Through the programs and practices, students have been repeatedly presented with problems and provided with the opportunity to deal with these challenges or tasks relatively autonomously. They become accustomed to taking initiative when something is not working well. To avoid an “us and them” experience, Mr. Taylor recommends that teachers identify shared goals and values with students, and talk with them about proceeding toward those goals. These programs, by giving true responsibility to students, help students to take pride in and feel commitment to their school.

## *Clive School*

*To me, TEAMS is a valuable option in which you can learn leadership and social skills. We plan dances and school activities that everybody can participate in. We try and help out students and be there for them to talk to. I think I can learn valuable skills in TEAMS that will come into use in my future. I think I can learn how to deal with people and try to help them in every way possible.*

—TEAMS student

Two years ago, Brent Galloway, the assistant principal at Clive School, a K–9 rural school of 300 students in Clive, initiated a complementary junior high course called **TEAMS—Together Everyone Achieves More Success**.

In developing TEAMS, Mr. Galloway intended to do the following:

- Improve the former Students' Council approach to student leadership
- Increase accountability for student leaders
- Provide more training in leadership
- Have more work at the school being done by students rather than by staff
- Increase student involvement in schoolwide decisions
- Increase opportunities for student leadership

TEAMS assumed responsibility for the following:

- Functions of the former Students' Council
- The schoolwide Social Skills Program
- The School Recognition Program

The TEAMS course includes training in leadership skills and a Service Learning component.

### ***TEAMS responsibilities***

In the second year of the program, the mandate of TEAMS was mapped in the following way:

### ***Schoolwide Social Skills Program***

- Social-skills training (for example, conflict resolution)
- Social-skills assemblies (for example, script writing and performing)

### ***Students' Council activities***

- Monthly meetings
- Social activities (for example, dances, initiation, theme days, TEAMS Zone, campout)
- Sporting activities (for example, hiking trip, ski trip, hockey game)
- Fundraising activities (for example, bake sales, magazines, candy-o-grams, ticket packs, raffles and so on)

### ***Service Learning***

- Remembrance Day Service
- Project Christmas Child
- Babysitting
- Bowl for Kids
- Terry Fox Run
- School beautification
- Peer tutoring
- Student newspaper
- Intramurals refereeing
- Conflict-management team

### ***School planning***

- School calendar/school planners
- School policies (for example, dance, dates, student recognition)

The schedule for 1997–98 showed each month to include a fundraiser, a theme day, a sports activity, a social activity and a recognition rally. Additional services and projects were ongoing as a result of the Service Learning component. The TEAMS course provided for ongoing training, planning, accountability and evaluation.

## *Students' voices*

During the first year of the program, students were asked to write about their experience of this course. The following are excerpts from some of the students' written reflections.

- “TEAMS has helped me a lot in being a leader in Clive School. TEAMS shows me that being a big leader in the school isn't as easy as it looks; first you have to earn that leadership so that students will look up to you, and then you have to set up a lot of activities to make the school a fun place for the students. TEAMS has helped me a lot. It has helped my reputation in the school, and it has put the opportunity in my hands to make the school a fun place for all the students. I think TEAMS has done a lot for the other students in school, and in their everyday lifestyle too, because it has helped them to learn in a fun way and TEAMS has helped the students talk in a nice way to others.”
- “To be a part of TEAMS you have to be able to speak your feelings, hold your own and participate in schoolwide activities. . . . I believe TEAMS has changed me—I speak out more and I have learned that I can make things happen. This kind of leadership lets everyone have a chance to be heard. . . . In this leadership class we have a lot of strong leaders that are heard more often than others, so we do have heavy debates, but in the end we work them out. TEAMS also helps good causes in fundraising and volunteers to do some work like babysitting and working in concession. We are recognized schoolwide for our cheerful, helpful way of working out problems.”
- “TEAMS has helped Clive School by uniting the students of Clive Junior High. It brings all the members of Grades 7, 8 and 9 together. TEAMS always encourages the participation of everyone. TEAMS has enabled me to become a strong leader. I have the opportunity to talk in front of large groups of people, including adults, my peers and younger children. I can also debate subjects and see both sides of the argument, not just the side I am on. Through TEAMS I have also learned to respect younger students, because often the younger students—and even older ones—look up to me. I have to treat everyone fairly because that is what makes a strong group of leaders

like TEAMS. I feel that TEAMS has influenced me to become a stronger person. I now not only think of myself, I think of other people and what I can do to benefit others. . . . The weakness we have been working very hard on as the leaders of Clive School is getting along within our group. Although we are leaders, we don't always see things the same way. So, before we can become better leaders, we must respect others and realize that they have their own opinions and should get a chance to share. In order to be effective as leaders, TEAMS must work together as a whole; we must look out for the group and not just ourselves. I feel we have done this very well and by the end of the year TEAMS will have produced an amazing group of strong leaders."

# High School Programs

## *Bev Facey Community High School*

The Peer Support Team is requesting your assistance in nominating students who you feel would be suitable Peer Support Students. We are looking for students who take the time to talk with students, help with their personal concerns and generally provide support when needed. These students tend to be the ones that others turn to when they have a problem or just need to talk.

*Please list at least five students who you feel would do a great job if they chose to join Peer Support.*

—From a survey form that invites students to nominate other students for the Peer Support Team

Nina Hoffman, counselor at Bev Facey Community High School, has facilitated a peer support program for the last seven years. The school has approximately 1,100 students. The Peer Support Team typically includes 12 to 20 students, which is a good number to work with as it makes program facilitation and coordination manageable. The Bev Facey program history demonstrates that a Peer Support Team makes a real difference to the school experience for everyone.

### Benefits

The activities of the Peer Support Team provide many benefits for individual students in the school, the entire student population and wider community projects. These benefits are clarified in the description of roles and services provided below. There are also many benefits for the Peer Support Team members themselves, including improved relationships with peers and family. Some join the team as a way to give themselves a supportive environment during a time of need. Many clarify their career goals through this program experience and choose counseling, social work or psychology as future directions in their education.

## ***Recruitment***

The size of the Peer Support Team ranges from 12 to 20 students from year to year, and tends to include more female than male students. Efforts are made to ensure that the team represents a wide cross-section of the school population. In particular, Mrs. Hoffman always makes certain that there is representation from special needs students in the school. The overall recruitment effort is very important to secure the team that is formed each year. Recruiting involves the following components:

- An information table staffed by Peer Support Team members is in place when Grade 9 students from feeder schools tour the school in the spring.
- The spring Open House is another opportunity to bring the program to the attention of students.
- In the spring, teachers and students are surveyed to invite their nominations of students with the skills and interests to be good additions to the Peer Support Team for the following year. Mrs. Hoffman follows up on these nominations with one-on-one contact.
- In the fall, at the first information meeting for the whole school, the program is brought to the students' attention and posters are displayed throughout the school.
- An information meeting is scheduled for students who may be interested in becoming members of the Peer Support Team. At this meeting, students from the previous year's team are present to share their experience and enthusiasm.

## ***Organization and structure***

### ***Beginning***

Interested students are provided with an information letter about the program and are asked to complete an application form in which they identify their interests, expectations and strengths. Parents of team members receive a letter indicating that their son/daughter has elected to participate in the program, outlining what some of the activities may be and asking for their support for the student's participation in after-school preparation for events. Students are asked to sign a contract which emphasizes

the importance of confidentiality and their awareness of their limitations and the importance of referring problems beyond their scope. Commitment is stressed and the concept of a team with each person carrying his or her own weight is emphasized.

### ***Support for Peer Support Team members***

Team members all have their own mail boxes to facilitate ongoing communication and coordination. Within the group they have “secret pals” to ensure that the caregivers also experience care. Mrs. Hoffman suggests that it is also important to plan celebration times throughout the year to ensure that all of their time together isn’t only work.

### ***Training***

Because some of the students must take the bus home after school, weekly meetings are scheduled during a lunch period. Since this limits the amount of training that can be conducted weekly, a retreat is held in the fall to provide the opportunity for training activities. Mrs. Hoffman notes that since students come with good skills, a natural empathy and sometimes previous peer support program experience, training can be quite minimal. Examples of training activities are described in the last section below. Students may also choose to attend out-of-school conferences on topics such as suicide prevention to extend their peer support background and training.

### ***Planning events***

At the beginning of the planning for an event or activity, Mrs. Hoffman facilitates the whole team’s initial brainstorming session. Once component activities are identified, smaller groups of students take responsibility for them. The student facilitator of each small group completes an “activity planning sheet” and reviews its contents with Mrs. Hoffman. For one of the annual activities, the Student of the Week Display Board, Mrs. Hoffman has found a classified staff member to serve as the co-facilitator. Finding more staff facilitators for individual events or activities would make this program more manageable.

### ***Coordinating with Students' Council***

The Students' Council in the school holds major responsibility for school spirit events. Typically, one of the members of the Peer Support Team is also a member of Students' Council and this facilitates coordination and communication. Typically, the Peer Support Team will organize fundraising activities such as "ghost-o-grams" on Halloween or "candy-grams" on Valentine's Day. Students' Council, in turn, will sometimes ask for a Peer Support Team member to help staff coat check at a dance and so on.

### ***Roles and services***

#### ***Support to individual students***

***Informal***—Peer Support Team members offer support to other students who are obviously upset or in need of someone to talk to. They use whatever skills, strategies or opportunities they have to do this. It may be just a friendly quip to show the student that someone cares, notices or is "on their team." If the Peer Support member is shy, he/she may enlist another team member to help the student in need or may ask Mrs. Hoffman to offer support.

***Formal***—Peer Support Team members are sometimes matched with students in need of a buddy. This can be a short-term arrangement such as for the first two days of a new student's arrival at the school. It can also be a long-term arrangement, such as a regularly scheduled visit for half of a lunch period each week. The latter arrangement might be used for a special needs student or a student who is struggling socially or academically. Matching is done carefully. Steps are taken to prevent or stop dependency.

#### ***Assistance to all students***

Peer Support students participate in the orientation offered to new students to the school. They also provide a great deal of service to students during Career Week to help them use the career resources centre and decision-making computer software. During that week they also serve as hosts and chairs for sessions conducted by guest speakers.

### ***School spirit***

The Peer Support Team facilitates activities that help all students to express care and interest in each other. Examples of such activities include a Birthday Board, ghost-o-grams, love-a-grams and so on. The Birthday Board lists the names of students with a birthday that day. These students also receive a cupcake. The Student of the Week Display Board recognizes students for a random act of kindness or for doing something beyond the call of duty. It provides their biography and indicates why they were nominated. The student also receives fries and a pop at lunch.

### ***Community service***

The Peer Support Team typically chooses a community project to contribute to. Examples of such contributions are the Christmas Hamper Program, selling daffodils for Cancer Month and participating in the Safe Place Community Run.

### ***Providing information and learning experiences***

The Peer Support Team chooses issues or topics for schoolwide educational experiences. Examples of topics chosen include relationship abuse, substance-abuse awareness and Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD). Mrs. Hoffman assists the Team in accessing school or community resources for these projects. The students have generated and implemented many creative and dramatic ideas for these one-week educational campaigns.

### ***Promoting peer support***

Throughout the year, posters identify Team members and invite new people to join. There is a display case featuring the Team members, as well as a section of the yearbook. Each year they design a T-shirt which they wear when doing peer support work at functions.

### ***Training activities***

Mrs. Hoffman uses AADAC training materials and a number of other resources in her work with this program. Listed below are some examples of activities she has found to work well in training sessions:

### ***Communication activities***

***Name and Color Game***—People introduce themselves by saying their name, a color that best represents them and why that color says something about them. Subsequently, each person has to say both the name and the color of the people who have already introduced themselves.

***Nursery Rhyme Game*** (Nonverbal Communication)—Using a simple nursery rhyme such as “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” each person recites the rhyme in a way that expresses a different underlying emotion.

***Specific and Immediate Feedback***—Each person writes specific, positive feedback on pieces of paper worn on the backs of people in the group.

***Fish Bowl*** (Active Listening)—Two people role-play conflict resolution. Others in the group watch and offer suggestions or help, when asked.

### ***Group-Work activities***

***Balls in the Air*** (Group Dynamics)—Standing in a circle, the group is given a number of balls of various sizes and shapes. First, they establish a routine that involves three people keeping each ball in motion (*team work*). They are then asked to reverse the routine for each ball (*response to change*). Next, two people are taken out of the group without notice (*loss of team*). Later, two people are added to the group in different spots (*including new members*).

***Group Problem-Solving***—The group is given a novel task such as figuring out how to get a series of objects from one spot to another without touching a particular obstacle (for example, an electric wire fence or pond full of alligators). Then they analyze their process. Alternately, the same problem is attempted by a number of smaller groups and then they compare their processes.

## ***Someone to Talk To: Peer Helping in High School: A Video***

### ***Voices of Peer Helpers:***

- “You don’t say, ‘I’ve been through that. I know how you feel.’ They need to say how *they* feel.”
- “You need someone your own age to talk to.”
- “Listening is really big—just having someone to listen to you, that’s one of the things that really helps.”
- “A lot of people feel they have nowhere to turn; peer helping shows them they do have someone to go to.”
- “Not every problem is a crisis; sometimes just being there is enough, especially for the youngest kids in the school.”

A National Film Board video entitled, “Someone to Talk To: Peer Helping in High School,” documents Peer Helping programs in two high schools in the Ottawa area. These programs are intended to extend counseling support to students throughout the school.

### ***Program rationale***

In the high school context, school counselors cannot know what all students’ needs are, let alone hope to address all these needs. For students with troubles, the counselor’s office is typically the last stop rather than the first. With Peer Helpers, there is no guidance form to complete and the feeling is less structured and more laid-back. A number of topics of concern to students are those they would prefer not to discuss with adults.

### ***Program structure***

Emphasis is given to ensuring good representation of the student population on the Peer Helping Team. The more Peer Helpers reflect their school, the more they can connect with students when parents and friends can’t. Students who have had problems themselves are welcome to be Peer Helpers. In fact, this opportunity has motivated some students to resolve their problems in order to make a successful application to be a Peer Helper.

Each morning, the guidance counselors and the Peer Helpers get together for a few minutes. This gives the guidance counselors an opportunity to plan their training. It also serves as a daily reminder to Peer Helpers that they have support.

### ***Peer Helpers' activities***

Peer Helpers will approach students who are obviously upset and offer an opportunity to talk. Students, even those who don't know them, also approach them and ask to talk. When Peer Helpers become concerned about a common or recurring problem, they will sometimes plan a presentation on the topic for the school assembly. They will also visit junior high schools to teach conflict-resolution skills to Grade 9 students.

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# Websites

**The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities:**  
[www.sacsc.ca](http://www.sacsc.ca)

**Alberta Education:** [ednet.edc.gov.ab.ca/safeschools/content.html](http://ednet.edc.gov.ab.ca/safeschools/content.html)

**Tri-faculty Research** (The Faculties of Education from the Universities of Lethbridge, Calgary and Alberta): [www.education.ualberta.ca/educ/research/tri-fac/tri-fac.html](http://www.education.ualberta.ca/educ/research/tri-fac/tri-fac.html)

