

## Service-Learning Project Sharing

A high quality example of a curriculum-based local or global outreach effort made possible by Learn and Serve Ohio, Partnerships Make a Difference, and a caring community of K-12 teachers and students

Learning with Purpose . . . Serving with Passion . . .  
**Creating a Positive Legacy**

### Project Title: *“Preschool Buddy” Partnership*

*“People just like us can be stuck in situations that are hard to get out of, so that is why we did this project.”*

**Big Idea:** Jones Middle School students with various cognitive, speech and behavioral disabilities formed lasting relationships with preschool buddies at *The Childhood League Center* and, in the process, learned valuable academic and daily living skills, social skills, and leadership skills.

**Teacher:** Shawn Heimlich, Jones Middle School, Upper Arlington City Schools, Upper Arlington, Ohio

**Students:** 41 sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students with various disabilities (autism, cognitive disabilities, speech/language disabilities, Specific Learning Disabilities, severe emotional disturbance, etc.) across a 4-year partnership

**Curriculum Area(s):** Social studies, math, reading, language arts, social skills

**Community Partner(s):** The Childhood League Center

### Planning and Implementation Process

#### Investigation

*How/why did you choose to do this project? What significant need(s) or issue(s) did your students address? What made the idea for this project compelling/inspiring? How did you get them intellectually/emotionally engaged?*

I began to research *The Childhood League Center* and investigate how to create a preschool buddy partnership because for my students, who had moderate learning and behavior disabilities, the demands of mastering basic academic skills could be overwhelming and frustrating. Intense daily instruction in a self-contained resource room could be physically, emotionally and behaviorally exhausting for these students. In addition, my students experienced deficits in social and daily living skills and often exhibited weaknesses in social problem solving and appropriate behavior. Deficits in multiple areas of learning, behavior, and social development can result in low self-esteem, frustration with learning, and isolation from peers. I needed to find a way to help my students feel successful as they learned academic and social skills.

As a classroom teacher, I continually challenged myself to find ways to make learning fun, motivating, rewarding, and practical for students. On a daily basis, it was important that I find ways to balance the need for intense direct instruction with engaging and motivating activities that built self-esteem, leadership, and a sense of community, fun, and laughter in the classroom.

*The Childhood League Center* is a non-profit organization that provides preschool services for children with special needs. When I considered the goals I had for my students, it was clear that *The Childhood League* was a perfect community partner, especially in view of its motto: "Finding pathways, possibilities and potential." I was in search of a way to help my students find these very things-- pathways for learning valuable social, leadership, behavior and functional skills; possibilities for identifying and demonstrating their individual talents and interests; and opportunities for discovering and realizing their potential to impact the lives of others, and in turn, achieve individual and unique greatness.

As I developed this project, I envisioned a partnership that would allow my students to "shine" as leaders, as readers, as behavioral role models . . . as buddies! In designing and structuring this partnership, I hoped to address the unique cognitive, behavioral, and social skills of each of my students. I also hoped to address the cognitive, behavioral, and social skills of our preschool buddies, 4-, 5- and 6-year-old students with developmental delays. Although my students didn't realize it initially, this partnership gave me the opportunity to incorporate reading, math, language arts, and social studies concepts and skills into activities focused on serving others in our community.

### **Preparation**

*How did you and the students get ready? What learning was involved? What partnerships did you develop?*

At the beginning of each year that we did the "Buddy Project", a representative from *The Childhood League Center* visited our class to tell us about our preschool buddies. We received the list of our buddies and introduced ourselves to them through letters and photos. We also learned about our buddies -- their interests, their disabilities, and their strengths. As a classroom group, we completed activities to help us identify who we were, how we could help our preschool buddies through our relationships with them, why it was important for us to be involved with our buddies, and what we hoped to learn from our buddies and through our service to *The Childhood League Center*.

After the first year of doing this project, my students learned about the previous year's buddies and saw photos of our work, binders of reflection activities, and examples of crafts, games, and snacks. Each year, my students were surprised to see the list of the many academic, behavior and social skills/concepts we would be learning or practicing when we went to "play" with our buddies.

To prepare for our initial trip to *The Childhood League Center* during the first year of our partnership, COTA (Central Ohio Transit Authority) brought a city bus to our school, talked with my students about the rights and responsibilities of riders of public transportation, trained students to use bus passes/money when paying bus fares, and took our class on a "training" ride in the community. My students learned how to read the various types and colors of bus signs, how to purchase and use bus passes, how to ride COTA safely and appropriately, and how to "problem solve" when riding public transportation.

For each trip to visit and play with our buddies, students chose gross motor skills games, crafts, snacks, and reading activities that were centered on a theme for the week (community members, seasons, occupations, etc.). Students prepared supply lists, grocery lists, and game ideas for each visit. On many occasions, students prepared a budget for grocery items and shopped for items at a local grocery store. Prior to each visit, students assembled kits for craft activities, prepared food items for snacks or prepared supplies for gross motor skills games. In preparation for visits, a speech/language therapist and classroom staff worked with specific students on selected social skills and appropriate behavior through role-play activities and structured therapy situations. In addition, students selected "responsibilities" for each visit (helping with snack, conducting a gross motor skills game, etc.) that capitalized on their individual interests and gifts.

### **Action**

*Service-learning allows students the chance to change the world—sometimes in small ways, sometimes in much larger ways. Please explain the meaningful service activities in which you and your students were involved.*

During each visit with the preschool buddies, students led our buddies in a craft activity and gross motor skills games, shared a snack with them, and acted as role models during free playtime, reading center time, and transitions between activities. Visits with preschool buddies occurred (across the four-year partnership) during one or two half-day visits per month, depending upon class size and organization each year.

Buddy visits typically followed a structured schedule:

- **Arrival & Free Play:** Middle school students arrived at *The Childhood League House* 3 classroom, greeted our preschool buddies, and spent 20-30 minutes engaged with the preschoolers. During this time, middle school students acted as appropriate behavior/social models and spent time with their buddies at "toy" centers or reading centers.
- **Circle Time:** Middle school students sat with their preschool buddies during morning calendar time, acting as appropriate models for our buddies, while I explained each activity and divided the students into small groups.

- **Craft Activity/Gross Motor Skill Game:** During this time, groups rotated between a structured craft activity and gross motor skill game aligned with the week's theme. The craft activity designed by the middle school students typically required close cooperation with and moderate support for their preschool buddies.
- **Snack:** During snack time, middle school students passed out our snack, modeled appropriate social skills, and supported preschool buddies with the task of eating and drinking.
- **Playground Time:** During the remainder of the visit, students from my classroom re-lived their much younger years, tearing around the playground and playing tag, hide-and-seek, and "war" with preschool buddies.

During an October visit, students used shredded orange and yellow tissue paper, contact paper and "face shapes" to create pumpkin window decorations. My students assisted preschool students who were learning to identify facial features/body language in creating pumpkin faces showing correct features and various emotions.

During another visit focusing on the theme of firefighters, my students assisted their preschool buddies in a game of "put out the fire" bowling. Middle school students decorated bowling pins with yellow and red flames. Blue kick-balls were rolled at the "flaming" bowling pins, and preschool buddies pretended the water (blue kick-balls) put out the fire.

Gross motor skills games and activities were selected and designed to be engaging and motivating for our preschool buddies. Some games required significant modeling, prompting, and praise from the middle school students. Other games allowed preschool buddies to participate independently.

## **Reflection**

*Written, oral, artistic, visual, dramatic and other forms of expression . . . all these are important ways of reflecting. In what ways did your students reflect on their experiences and the learning that was a part of it? What were a few of their key observations and insights?*

During our 45-minute COTA bus ride from *The Childhood League Center* to Jones Middle School, much of the time was spent in conversation about the events of the morning. With only minimal conversation starters from adults, students spent the majority of time talking about those "Did you see it when . . ." or "It was funny when . . ." or "Why did \_\_\_\_ do \_\_\_\_ during the game?" moments. As a result of more structured reflection activities, students assembled a three-ring binder of brainstorming activities we had completed as a class, as well as photos and drawings, examples of crafts, graphic organizers, writing activities and letters, and other mementos collected during our visits with preschool buddies.

During reflection activities, my students asked questions to help them understand their preschool buddies' disabilities better. For example, "Why does Jill drink from a special cup?" or "Why does Kelly hit me so much?" or "When will Isaac learn to talk?" These honest questions helped them understand and respect people's differences. Reflection activities also often included role-play: "When we go to visit Alex again, we will have him sit in a chair at a table to read. How can you help get him to a chair?" or, "If we see Kelly hit another student, what do you think we should do?" or, "When Andrew cries

when it's time to put the blocks away, how can we help him stop crying?" Many times, students were able to generate appropriate responses for these situations. Even students who struggle with their own social and classroom behaviors were able to give appropriate alternatives or solutions when considering their preschool buddies' behaviors.

### **Demonstration/Celebration**

*Along the way and at the end of the project, how did you celebrate the impact of your efforts? In what ways did students demonstrate their new learning?*

Reflection binders were utilized as a method for evaluating students' involvement and learning, and also served as a mode of demonstrating their learning. Following each visit, students reviewed the photos, the craft example, and the game descriptions. During this "conversational" time, students were asked to share some positive thoughts regarding their buddies, their own behavior/modeling during the trip, and a goal accomplished during the visit.

Photos of the trip were shared with the group using PowerPoint, and students shared funny/interesting anecdotes with each other from their visit. Photos of our partnership were included in an end-of-the-year service-learning video of all of the projects done at Jones Middle School. At the end of the school year, students were given the items from their reflection binders and were excited to take the items home to share with parents and family members.

### **Assessment/Evaluation**

*To validate service-learning and spotlight key results, we need to gather information about student learning and attitude changes, as well as the impact on local/global needs and issues. What are some ways in which you were able to document your students' progress and the impact of their efforts?*

As a result of our partnership with preschool buddies, students learned functional, daily living skills in math, reading and language arts, appropriate social skills for interacting with adults in community settings, appropriate leadership skills for being a role model for preschool buddies, and problem solving skills for dealing with the unstructured, unpredictable nature of community participation. These skills were actively demonstrated during our visits and were further shown in the three-ring binder of brainstorming activities we had completed as a class, which contained photos and drawings, examples of crafts, graphic organizers, writing activities and letters, and other mementos collected during our visits with preschool buddies. Students were also assessed via oral feedback on what they learned about accessing and using public transportation responsibly.

### **Curriculum Connections**

*High quality service-learning connects service with the curriculum. A variety of state and local standards can be addressed through the investigation, preparation, action, reflection and celebration/demonstration/evaluation phases of service-learning.*

*So . . . how did your students use their academic knowledge and skills to "make a difference?" How did they become scientists, writers, artists, researchers, etc. to support this project? What curricular areas*

*were addressed through this project? What were some specific standards or learning objectives that were covered? What kinds of interdisciplinary planning and learning occurred?*

High quality service-learning connects service with the curriculum. A variety of state and local standards can be addressed through the investigation, preparation, action, reflection and celebration/demonstration/evaluation phases of service-learning.

**Language Arts:** written and oral reflections, letter writing, graphic organizer activities for preparation and reflection, paragraph construction

**Math:** budgeting, computation skills, time concepts, daily living skills

**Social Studies:** local/community geography, community navigation, map skills, community citizenship and participation, rights and responsibilities of citizenship, community interdependence and collaboration

**Social Skills:** community travel, community behavior and social interaction

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills**

*There is an increasing emphasis on helping students develop and demonstrate 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills (Ken Kaye et. al.) Service-learning provides an excellent way to incorporate these skills in an authentic way. Please check the themes and skills that were addressed in your project.*

**X** Global Awareness

**X** Financial, Economic, Business, and Entrepreneurial Literacy

**X** Civic Literacy

**X** Health Literacy

**X** Creativity and Innovation

**X** Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

**X** Communication and Collaboration

Information Literacy

Media Literacy

ICT (Information, Communications, and Technology) Literacy

**X** Flexibility and Adaptability

**X** Initiative and Self-Direction

**X** Social and Cross-Cultural Skills

**X** Productivity and Accountability

**X** Leadership and Responsibility

*Please provide at least one specific example or anecdote of how one of the skills was evident in your students' work.*

#### **Financial, Economic, Business, and Entrepreneurial Literacy**

Students created budgets and were responsible for buying food, bus tickets, and craft supplies.

## **Impact: Kids Using Their “Best Stuff” To Make A Difference**

*Curricular skills/knowledge and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills are certainly part of students’ “best stuff.” In addition . . . how did your students use their individual gifts, passions and strength of character in carrying out this project?*

During initial visits, students selected their own buddies and rotated through all activities with their buddies. However, as the first year of the project progressed, individuals voiced a desire to stay with a specific activity or game because they “liked it” or were “good at it.” Students who were more physically active (who struggled with attention issues or seat-based activities) voiced a preference for staying involved with the gross motor skills games. Students who liked art or were creative also indicated their desire to stay with the craft activity.

With this arrangement, students also had the opportunity to interact with all of the preschool buddies during visits. Students who demonstrated higher levels of appropriate social skills and who were most interested in working with food put themselves “in charge” of snack time.

And let’s be honest, no matter what your age, it’s fun to dig your hands into a pile of sand or a big bucket of water; playtime is fun for all ages and abilities! This very unstructured playtime produced some of the most spontaneous, memorable moments of our time with preschool buddies.

*What aspects of the project made your students especially proud?*

Working with a preschool buddy was an opportunity for each of our Jones Middle School students to be a leader, to be a role model, and to be respected. For many students with disabilities, who struggle with the pace and complexity of social interactions and navigating middle school life, visits with preschool buddies provided the opportunity for success and leadership.

## **RIGOR, RELEVANCE AND RELATIONSHIPS**

*Willard Daggett and others have identified rigor, relevance, and relationships as key components of school reform. Include any further thoughts you have re: how your project reflected and enhanced these elements for your students.*

The team-building and “get-to-know-you” activities we engaged in as a class helped us all to identify our interests, strengths, and characteristics that we would capitalize on during our partnership with preschool buddies. Activities were designed to help us learn why we were working together as a classroom group and why it was important for us to work together to develop relationships with our preschool buddies.

## **And Now, Some Numbers . . .**

*Please estimate the time spent on your project:*

Number of Project-Related Hours per Student: 42

Number of Students: 41\*

Total Estimated Hours of Service and Learning: 1,722\*

\* Across four years of partnership with *The Childhood League Center*

### **Other Insights/Your Own Reflections**

*Can you describe one or more of the “magic” or “aha” moments that happened as part of this experience?*

Much of the value of preschool buddy visits came from the simple, un-orchestrated moments only preschool students and middle school students can provide: the excitement on the faces of middle school students at the sight of preschool buddies lined up at the windows, cheering and pounding on the glass as we crossed the park to *The Childhood League Center* entrance; the pictures drawn by our buddies and mailed to the students in my classroom (that managed to stay on the walls in a “shrine-like” collection for the entire school year); pictures from visits hung in my students’ lockers; conversations like “Did you see when \_\_\_\_ hugged me?!” or, “Did you see when they all piled on top of me on the playground?” These are the moments when my students felt proud, believed they were leaders, and felt respected.

#### **Contact Info:**

**Name:** Shawn G. Heimlich

**Position:** Director of Special Education

**School:** (At the time of this project, Shawn was the Cross-Categorical Resource Room Teacher at Jones Middle School, Upper Arlington Schools.)

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#### **Other Resources**

The Childhood League Center

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