

High school program bridges disabilities divide

By Melanie Asmar, Concord Monitor | January 28, 2006

CONCORD, N.H. --Sophomore Kaitlyn Dauphine sat in math class, multiplying fractions. With her pencil poised and one finger on a multiplication chart, Kaitlyn's eyes scanned between the math problems and senior Ally Daniels, watching for her nod.

"That's right," Ally said. "Now you divide. Two goes into 15 how many times?"

Every minute or so, Kaitlyn put down her pencil and ran her fingers through her hair.

"Do you think I'm pretty?" she asked Ally.

"Yeah, I think you're gorgeous. So six goes into 65 how many times?"

Kaitlyn and Ally have the same hair: long, straight, deep dirty blond. Kaitlyn is small, thin and friendly. She sings in the Concord High School choir. Ally, who is tall and outgoing, is captain of the girls' basketball team. When she visits Kaitlyn in math class, they add, subtract and talk about boys. Sometimes, Kaitlyn calls Ally's cell phone on the weekends and gushes about a tall, handsome junior named Tom.

Ally, who wants to be a nurse, will go to college next year. Kaitlyn, who has a learning disability, has several more years at Concord High.

Ally was one of 34 Concord High students enrolled last semester in the first leg of a yearlong class designed to foster relationships between what educators call "typical" students and students with disabilities. Called Peer to Peer, the class includes academic and practical components. First, students learn about disabilities and how to interact with people who have them. Then they're assigned to work with a peer who has a disability.

Funded by a \$32,000 grant from the Bubel/Aiken Foundation, as in singer Clay Aiken, who was studying to be a special-education teacher before he became a star on American Idol, the class is meant to crush stereotypes and create a climate where friendships can bridge the disabilities divide, teachers said. The hope is that those friendships forged in school will extend beyond the classroom -- to the mall, to the movies, to parties on Friday nights.

But the fledgling program, which recently started with a new batch of students, raises questions: Is forcing relationships the best way to make kids with disabilities socially accepted? Are those relationships real? If not, is it still worthwhile to nurture friendships that end at 3:00, or should the school district focus on improving the entire special education system to better integrate kids in the first place? And in the end, who's to say whether the program is working -- adult experts or the kids involved?

There's also the question of whether the class will continue beyond June, when the grant runs out. In the next few months, the Concord School Board will decide its fate. Board members

asked to comment for this story said they didn't want to weigh in before Peer to Peer is officially evaluated.

But Kaitlyn, and other students participating in the new partnerships, did. Kaitlyn said she likes it better when Ally helps her in math class than when a teacher's aide acts as her tutor.

"It's different because we can be funny," Kaitlyn said.

Five days before Christmas, sophomore Justine Gayhardt scooted around the darkroom at Concord High, developing a photo of a dog and its owner's feet. She moved deftly in the dimly lit room, maneuvering around kids hunched at enlargers and closing cupboards left open by her classmates.

Senior Sam Dolloff leaned against the wall and watched Justine, brow furrowed, expose her print. Then the pair moved to the trays of developing chemicals, and Sam started a conversation.

"So did you go Christmas shopping yesterday?" she asked.

Justine swished her photo in the chemicals.

"No."

Then, almost shouting, Justine called out "Thirty seconds in the water!" and moved her photo to the next tray.

"Did you go this weekend?" Sam asked again.

"No."

"I went Christmas shopping this weekend," Sam continued. "I went to the mall, and it was packed."

"Really?"

Without pausing, Justine turned and walked out of the darkroom to fetch another negative to develop another photo.

Justine has autism, which makes it hard for her socialize, said her mother, Viki Gayhardt. She perceives an onslaught of information at once and is unable to decipher what's important and what's not. School, with its crowded hallways and busy schedule, can be over-stimulating and confusing, she said.

"It's like being at a rock concert and having to learn at the same time," said Gayhardt, who also has a son with autism and a master's degree in disabilities studies.

When Gayhardt heard about Peer to Peer, she said she begged for Justine to be part of it. Though her daughter has teenagers in her life who have grown up with her and who care about her, Gayhardt said Justine never gets calls to do "regular teenage stuff," like sleepovers. Gayhardt has had to help make those things happen over the years, and she said it's nice to see the school stepping in.

"I don't feel that relationships with people with disabilities happen naturally, especially with teenagers," Gayhardt said. "They're so into their own lives and doing their own things. It's difficult unless we create those opportunities, and I feel that's what Peer to Peer has done."

That's not to say the friendships happen instantly. Sam said the first time she went to Justine's photography class, Justine took one look at her and said, "Who the hell are you?" In the beginning, Justine would also say things like, "Why are you so weird?" Sam said Justine's outbursts made her feel awkward; she didn't know how to react.

But over the semester, Justine warmed up. Sam said she could tell because when Justine was tired, she'd rest her head on Sam's shoulder. One day, she took a photo of Sam at White Park. Justine much prefers developing pictures to taking them, and she developed the one of Sam more times than Sam can count.

The day before winter break, Justine gave Sam a Christmas present. Sam hummed as she tore the wrapping paper to reveal a thick silver bracelet.

"Oh, that's so pretty!" Sam said.

Justine hugged Sam tight, picking her up a few inches off the floor. Then she turned and walked away, humming.

Some disabilities experts argue that programs like Peer to Peer aren't creating real friendships. While it's great to have people with and without disabilities hang out together, they say, the fact that it takes a program to do that actually sets the disabilities rights movement back.

"People will say if you're paid -- with money, credit, community service -- it can't be friendship," said Zach Rossetti, a former Concord resident who is earning his doctorate at Syracuse University in New York by researching high school friendships between teenagers with and without disabilities. "It's a nice thing, but it can't be friendship. It takes away the reciprocity."

Cheryl Jorgensen, a project director at the University of New Hampshire Institute on Disability, agrees. People with disabilities already have a lot of people paid to be in their lives, such as tutors and physical therapists, she said. What they lack are close friends, people besides family members whom they can call when they have big news to share or have had a bad day.

But they're not looking for charity, or for someone who will talk to them because they've been assigned to, she said. In Jorgensen's view, that's as ridiculous as forcing members of other widely accepted social groups to hang out with their sidelined counterparts.

"Do we have a program where the white kids help the black kids?" Jorgensen said. "Where the straight kids help the gay kids? Where the rich kids help the poor kids?"

Instead, the better way to cultivate natural friendships, some experts say, is to make sure students with disabilities aren't hidden away in special classes or made to ride special buses. While Concord High has long subscribed to the practice of "inclusion," the experts say more is needed. Then programs like Peer to Peer wouldn't be necessary.

"For people with a history of segregation and abuse, making this a big program can be seen as a slippery slope, as returning to more segregated or grouped services," Rossetti said. "I want a kid to be there anyway . . . to have a bigger chance of making friends on their own."

However, Kate Daniels, who teaches Peer to Peer, echoed Gayhardt in saying that friendships between the two groups usually don't happen on their own. While Concord High still has a special classroom for some students with disabilities, most are also enrolled in regular classes. Even then, the presence of an adult teacher's aide often deters other students from talking to the student with a disability, she said.

"We can't keep waiting," Daniels said.

Before senior Jon Tuttle took Peer to Peer, he would laugh at sayings like the one he shared in class the other day: "Arguing on the Internet is like running in the Special Olympics. Even if you win, you're still a retard."

Jon said he'd thought like that for a long time: When he was in fifth grade, a boy in his class was talking about competing in the Special Olympics. Jon said he called it the "Retard Olympics" and got in trouble.

"I used to think things like that were funny," Jon said. "But not after this class."

The reasons students signed up for the class were varied. Some thought it would be an easy elective credit. Others, such as sophomore Abby Carozza, have a sibling with a disability. Senior Alex Hirshberg, like many others, said he'd never been friends with a student with a disability before, but he had always been curious.

What the students learned by the end of the semester, however, was the same: Teenagers with disabilities are like everyone else in that they want friends and are capable of being friends.

Most every student echoed that conclusion when they presented their final projects last week.

"The goal of Peer to Peer was not to be a teacher or a role model. It was just to be a friend," Abby Carozza said.

"Our friendships weren't based on the fact that we had to hang out with these kids. We got to know the person behind the disability," said senior Christina Dickinson.

"My role is to reach out to people with disabilities," said sophomore Marissa Geiger.

Senior Brian McGrath didn't think he'd actually enjoy Peer to Peer. A strong, extroverted student on the boys' basketball team, Brian said he and his friends made fun of the class and used derogatory words like "retard." On the first day of class, Brian said he'd signed up because his uncle had multiple sclerosis and was "confined to a wheelchair."

Teacher Kate Daniels said when she heard that, she thought, "Uh-oh. We've got a long way to go." That phrase is considered archaic; people aren't confined to wheelchairs, they use them to get around.

But after spending time with senior David Saltmarsh, who has a learning disability and Attention Deficit Disorder, Brian has changed both his mind and the way he talks about people with disabilities. One thing David told him really hit home: He said he'd never been sledding. Brian was upset that David had never experienced the types of things other teenagers have. He's resolved to take David sledding, though it hasn't happened yet.

"It's not a matter of feeling bad for these kids," Brian said. "I'm not saying you should give kids with disabilities tons of sympathy, but you should give them respect."

David said hanging out with Brian during his study hall is "exhilarating." It's better than working with a teacher's aide because when he's with Brian, they joke around, he said.

"We work most of the time," David said. "Sometimes we also have fun playing games and stuff."

David's mother, Cheri Saltmarsh, said she can always tell when David has spent time with Brian. Her usually solitary son blows in through the door after school, sweaty from playing basketball and chattering about everything he and Brian did.

"It's just so important for David to feel like he fits in," Saltmarsh said. "Since Peer to Peer, he's been having so much fun. He's been feeling like a regular high school senior."

One of the biggest criticisms of the class is that these friendships will dry up when the semester is over. Once the biology class or the gym class is done, the three hours a week the students spent together will either disappear completely, or the teenagers with disabilities will be given a new crop of students to be their friends for a few months, said Cheryl Jorgensen of the University of New Hampshire Institute on Disability.

It's too early to tell what will happen for sure, but a few students have made moves toward continuing their relationships. Junior Samantha Lassonde rearranged her schedule next semester so she can keep working with her peer. Senior Caitie Potter has agreed to spend seven hours a week after school with sophomore Sarah Noonkester, a shy girl with Down syndrome who has an infectious giggle.

Perhaps the friendships that look most promising are those that extended beyond the school. For example, Alex Hirshberg recently invited senior Brad Niejadlik over for dinner. Seniors Jenn

Allen and Maggie Conn and sophomore Lisa Fosterling once asked senior Olivia Heckscher, who has Down syndrome, to Jenn's house for a pizza and a movie. Another time, they went bowling.

Olivia says Jenn, Maggie and Lisa are like her sisters and her best friends. Before she met them, Olivia said she was bored in school. Now, it's more fun.

"We have a good friendship," she said. "I respect them. They respect me."

Olivia's parents, Stephen and Laurence Heckscher, said their daughter has never been timid. But with Peer to Peer, the other kids are taking the initiative to befriend her and not the other way around.

"She loves school and has never been shy about taking her food tray and sitting next to the captain of the football team," Stephen Heckscher said. "But it (Peer to Peer) expands her experience in Concord."

Some experts remain skeptical, however. Jorgensen said these friendships aren't deep enough.

"The occasional call to go bowling? Most typical kids wouldn't be happy with that," she said.

But Principal Gene Connolly, special education coordinator Donna Palley and teacher Kate Daniels say it's a start.

"There are 34 more kids who know about disabilities and can say they have a relationship with a kid with disabilities," Daniels said. "That's 34 more kids than there were on Aug. 28."

Next semester, there will be 45 students in three sections of Peer to Peer. That's nearly 80 total.

"If we keep educating kids, the barriers will fall away," she added.