

# Promoting Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships Through Peer Support Interventions

Erik W. Carter, Lisa S. Cushing, and Craig H. Kennedy

**H**igh school represents a critical juncture in the lives of youth. It can be a time when students explore their strengths, interests, and preferences; participate in a broader range of classes, school activities, and extra-curricular offerings; and develop the skills and attitudes they need to transition to adulthood. Indeed, high school students often receive more opportunities for independence and self-determination; they enjoy establishing new relationships with their peers; and they benefit from involvement in a wide range of school experiences that shape their future plans and aspirations. But high school

also can be a challenging time during which youth miss out on these important educational experiences and leave school without a strong foundation for future success. Many educators, researchers, and policymakers are recognizing that too many youth, with and without disabilities, are not accessing the critical learning and social opportunities that will prepare them for life after high school.

## High School Redesign Movements

Efforts are underway throughout the country to redesign the high school experience so that all students will benefit from school and graduate well-prepared for adulthood. Three important themes have emerged as guiding principles underlying these reform efforts—*rigor, relevance, and relationships* (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2004). First, all students should have access to a rigorous curriculum. Teachers must hold high expectations for every student, design learning experiences that challenge students to achieve their potential, provide the supports students need to succeed, and remove barriers to engagement and achievement. Second, all students should have access to school experiences

that have relevance for their lives. Instruction must be engaging, draw upon students' interests, and equip them with the life skills they will need to be active and contributing citizens. Third, schools should be deliberate about fostering meaningful relationships for all students. A sense of belonging, positive relationships with peers, and access to personalized supports are all known to contribute to students' success in school and overall quality of life. High schools that emphasize these three elements — rigor, relevance, and relationships — are presumed to offer a more engaging and motivating place for youth to learn.

We would stress that rigor, relevance, and relationships are just as essential and beneficial for youth with severe disabilities. Yet, a visit to most high schools across the country would reveal that the majority of students with severe disabilities are not participating in rigorous classes alongside their peers without disabilities, are not engaged in learning a relevant curriculum, and have few relationships with their same-age peers. Even when enrolled in general education classes and other school activities, students often lack the supports they need to access the numerous social and learning opportunities available within these settings.

How can high schools ensure that youth with severe disabilities access inclusive experiences designed with rigor, relevance, and relationships in mind? Although we have long known *how* students are included should receive as much consideration as *where* students are served, the widespread use of individually assigned paraprofessionals suggests that more deliberate reflection is needed on the strategies used to support high school inclusion (Giangreco & Broer, 2007). Indeed, the heavy reliance on adult-delivered supports to promote inclusion may not be yielding the social and academic benefits that educational teams intend (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Increasingly, calls are being issued for schools to consider alternative approaches for supporting the inclusion of students with severe disabilities.

## Peer Support Arrangements

Peer support arrangements are one promising approach for promoting access to rigorous, relevant learning experiences and expanding opportunities for students to establish new relationships with their peers. These intervention strategies involve inviting one or more peers without disabilities to provide ongoing social and academic support to their classmates with severe disabilities while receiving guidance and support from a paraprofessional or teacher. The following steps typically are taken to implement these strategies within inclusive classrooms:

- **Identify students with disabilities** who need assistance to participate in class activities;
- **Recruit peers** from within the same classroom to help provide some of these supports;
- **Arrange for students** to sit next to each other;

- **Orient peers** to their roles, explain the rationale for their involvement, and show them basic strategies for supporting the academic and social participation of their classmate;
- **Provide ongoing monitoring**, feedback, and assistance to peers and their partners throughout the semester, as needed; and,
- **Shift paraprofessionals** to a broader support role within the classroom through which they assist all students, as directed by the teacher.

These strategies are individually tailored to address the instructional and social needs of students with disabilities.

Peers can help provide a range of academic, social, and/or behavioral supports to their partner with disabilities. For example, they might support their partner's participation in class activities by working together on assignments, supporting involvement in cooperative groups, modifying activities, paraphrasing lectures, asking clarifying questions, reviewing work, offering corrective feedback, making sure needed materials are available, and/or explaining how to complete part of an assignment. Peer supports can promote attainment of social-related IEP goals by encouraging their partner to interact socially, extending conversational turns, modeling contextually appropriate social skills, reinforcing communication attempts, and redirecting inappropriate conversational topics. They also encourage interactions with other classmates by making initial introductions, highlighting shared interests and other commonalities, and extending interactions outside of the classroom (e.g., lunch, extracurricular clubs, after-school activities). Although these support strategies can be modeled by a paraprofessional or special educator as students work together, it often is helpful for peers to also meet with a teacher outside of class to get oriented to their new roles.

Paraprofessionals continue to take overall responsibility for ensuring that the educational needs of students with severe disabilities are being met, but they begin fading their direct support as the students become more comfortable working together. In other words, their role within inclusive classrooms broadens, enabling them to provide support to a wider range of students in the class. However, paraprofessionals continue to seek out ways to foster learning and interaction opportunities for the student with disabilities and always remain available to provide needed feedback and assistance to peer supports and their partners. Moreover, they continue to assume any responsibilities that generally are not appropriate for peers, such as responding to behavioral challenges, addressing medical needs, documenting IEP progress, and adapting assignments.

### **Benefits for Participating Students and Educators**

Research documenting the effectiveness of peer support interventions has grown steadily over the past decade. Our own research, for example, has shown that peers can be quite adept at supporting their classmates and that a number of academic and

social benefits are available to participating students with *and* without disabilities (see Carter, Cushing, Clark, & Kennedy, 2005; Cushing & Kennedy, 1997; Kennedy & Itkonen, 1994; Shukla, Kennedy, & Cushing, 1998, 1999). Academically, peer support arrangements offer some distinct advantages over individually assigned paraprofessional support. When working with their classmates, students with severe disabilities are more engaged in ongoing class activities and have greater access to instructional content that is aligned with the general curriculum. Peer supports make sure their partners are staying on-task, working on similar instructional activities, and receiving needed feedback. Although concerns are sometimes raised that peers may fall behind academically by serving in this support role, research suggests just the opposite. Students who themselves are struggling academically often show improvements of one to two letter grades (Cushing & Kennedy, 1997). The additional feedback and assistance peers receive from adults, coupled with the experience of teaching to someone else, may partially explain these academic benefits. Peer support arrangements also offer substantial social benefits for participating students. Students with disabilities have more frequent interactions and access more social supports when working with their classmates, rather than working exclusively with a paraprofessional. Moreover, students' interactions with their peers tend to be fairly reciprocal and balanced across both academic and social topics, easing concerns that such arrangements necessarily encourage "hierarchical" or exclusively tutorial relationships. Because high school teachers so often rely on lecture and independent seatwork, peer support arrangements appear to create opportunities for promoting interaction, building social skills, and fostering relationships that are otherwise unavailable in these settings.

For teachers and paraprofessionals, peer support arrangements offer an effective intervention strategy that is feasible to implement within general education classrooms. They draw upon natural supports that already are available within the classroom, enabling teachers to differentiate instruction for an increasingly diverse group of learners. Paraprofessionals often share that they appreciate having more clearly defined roles and they enjoy having the chance to work with a broader range of students (Causton-Theoharis, Giangreco, Doyle, & Vadasy, 2007).

### **Planning for Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships**

Roger is a 16-year-old youth with multiple disabilities who attends King High School. He has cerebral palsy and intellectual/developmental disabilities. Roger is a friendly young man who uses a dynamic device with a head pointer to communicate. He is verbal, but rarely speaks because it is hard for others to understand him. Roger relies on nodding and shaking his head to answer "yes" or "no" questions, and relies on his communication device to answer more complex questions. Roger uses a motorized wheelchair to get around. He has had the chair since 8th grade and loves the independence. Roger can read at the fourth grade level, but he rarely reads books because he needs

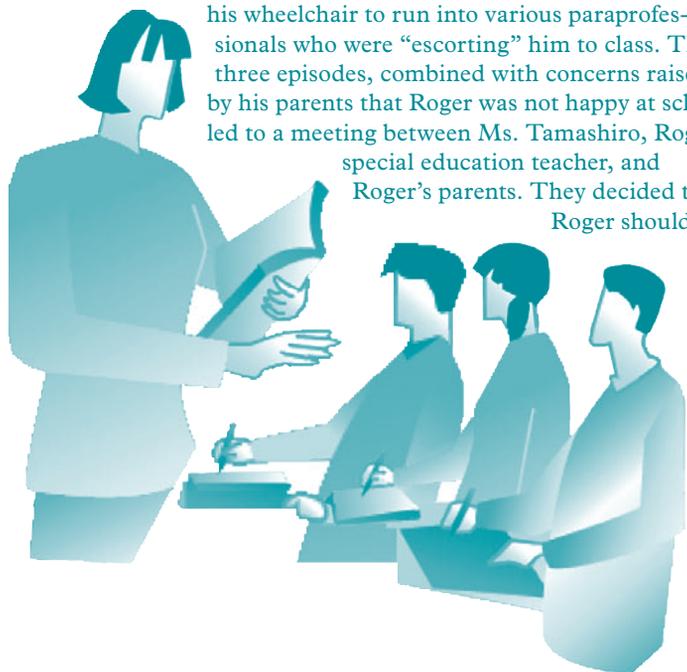
help to turn the pages. Roger, however, spends hours on the Internet because he can independently use his head pointer to access the Internet.

Roger is included in a number of general education classes with his tenth grade peers. He spends time with several friends in and out of school. His closest friends are Jeremy, Thomas, Marcus, and Theresa. Jeremy is his best friend. Jeremy sits next to Roger in U.S. Government and math. Thomas sits next to Roger in homeroom and computer science. Marcus is in Roger's study hall and Theresa sits next to Roger in English and science. During nonacademic times, Roger can be seen eating lunch or hanging out with a number of friends.

Jeremy and Roger also spend time with each other outside of school. They are both interested in movies and music. They live near each other, which makes it easy to spend time at each other's respective houses and their parents are supportive of the friendship. Roger's parents hold a Friday night pizza and movie night. Roger and Jeremy are encouraged to invite other friends to join in the fun. It is not uncommon for a dozen adolescents to attend the Friday night party. In addition, Jeremy's dad is a drummer in a local band. Jeremy and Roger like to hang out at Jeremy's house during band rehearsals and on days when there are no rehearsals, the young men scour the internet for new music.

Roger is happy with his schooling; however, this was not always the case. Last year, as a freshman, Roger rarely had an opportunity to interact with peers. He attended one general education class and was only "allowed" to go when a paraprofessional was available to accompany him. Like other teenagers, Roger disliked being singled out. He did not want to be accompanied by an adult and especially didn't like sitting next to an adult in the back of the class. Roger had made it quite clear that he did not want to be supported by adults. On three separate occasions, Roger used

his wheelchair to run into various paraprofessionals who were "escorting" him to class. These three episodes, combined with concerns raised by his parents that Roger was not happy at school led to a meeting between Ms. Tamashiro, Roger's special education teacher, and Roger's parents. They decided that Roger should be



included in more classes with his peers and decided to minimize the use of paraprofessionals as his primary source of support. That spring, Roger was enrolled in English, math, and music. Ms. Tamashiro met with the general education teachers before classes began and asked the educators to recruit students as peer supports. The teachers were surprised at how many students expressed an interest in supporting Roger. Indeed, Roger's current friends are the direct result of his access to peers in general education classes last spring.

Not only have Roger's social interactions increased, but he is now engaging the general education curriculum in a manner allowing him to be challenged academically. Prior to the start of the U.S. Government class, Ms. Tamashiro met with Mr. Frith, the general education teacher. They discussed a number of issues pertinent to successfully including Roger in class. These issues included:

- **Identifying** the statewide standards set for the class and how Roger would meet or partially meet each standard;
- **Understanding** common class routines, expectations, and assessments and agreeing on adaptations to routines, expectations, and assessments; and
- **Identifying** which IEP goals to embed within class.

As each topic was discussed, the educators' created a plan that described how Roger would demonstrate knowledge and understanding in class. Thus, Roger's curriculum is directly linked to the same curriculum as his peers but adapted to meet his needs. For example, when learning about the three branches of government, Roger is expected to identify the three main branches, and identify the names of the current President and Vice President in the executive branch.

The curriculum is meaningful and motivating for Roger because he is learning alongside his peers. To facilitate Roger's learning, Ms. Tamashiro uses naturally existing supports within the class (i.e., general education teacher and peers). The special education teacher and staff work behind the scenes to set Roger up for success. They are responsible for ensuring curricular adaptations are in place for Roger each day. Mr. Frith understands that his role is to teach his students, including Roger. He makes sure to include Roger in class discussions and to ask Roger questions that are either "yes" or "no" responses or that are short, two or three word, answers.

Jeremy is responsible for supporting Roger's daily academic and social needs. For example, he writes homework or class assignments in Roger's assignment notebook. As he writes, he reads it aloud. During class lectures, Jeremy takes notes for both of them. He paraphrases the lectures and highlights the main concepts identified by Ms. Tamashiro. Jeremy reads the textbook aloud and stops every third or fourth sentence to ask a question related to the text. He reads directions on worksheets in a manner that Roger understands. He also embeds a number of Roger's IEP goals into class. For example, one of Roger's goals is to

independently navigate his wheelchair around the school grounds. Jeremy walks alongside Roger, but Roger takes the lead. Another IEP goal is to

improve verbal communication and increase the use of his device. Roger responds to Jeremy's questions. He is highly motivated to talk to his friend. Roger is also working on improving writing skills. Jeremy makes sure that Roger is turning in homework assignments with sentences that are grammatically correct and spelled correctly. It is easy to embed several of Roger's goals in a natural and meaningful way.

One side effect of serving as a peer support for Jeremy has been an improvement in his grades. Jeremy is not the best of students. He is a "C" student. However, Jeremy has been doing very well in Government, consistently obtaining "B's" and even some "A's." This trend has been observed with Roger's peer supports in other classes. Like Jeremy, Theresa struggles to maintain "C's" and often receives "D's" and "F's." However, in English and science, she maintains a "B" average. Even Thomas, a straight "A" student continues to receive "A's."

As far as social support, Jeremy walks with Roger to class. As they walk, Jeremy encourages Roger to use his verbal skills. In class, Jeremy sits next to Roger and gathers necessary supplies and materials. While they are waiting for class to begin, they talk to each other. Jeremy also encourages his friends to hang out with them. This way, if Jeremy is sick, then another peer can assist Roger that day.

Ms. Lopez, the paraprofessional, has assumed a role that is different from what she is used to doing. Rather than sitting in the back of the room at a table with Roger and providing one-to-one support, she now promotes Roger's learning by creating in-class adaptations prior to class, acting as liaison between the special education teacher and general education teacher, and supporting the peer support. She ensures that necessary curricular adaptations are ready at the beginning of class and provides Jeremy with any instructions relating to the specific adaptation. When class begins, Ms. Lopez meets with Jeremy and Roger to make sure that they are prepared (i.e. have the necessary materials, are organized, completed homework and assignments, and understand what will be done). She wanders around the room and assists other students in class. Ms. Lopez checks on the dyad frequently to see that they are on-task. Jeremy knows that if he has a question, he can ask Ms. Lopez or Mr. Frith.

### **Peer Support Interventions: Everybody Wins**

It is not often that new educational techniques come along in which everybody benefits, but peer support interventions seem to fit this bill. Students with severe disabilities gain access to the general curriculum, make more friends, and develop improved social skills. Students who serve as peer supports enjoy learning more responsibilities, often improve their academic performance, and expand their social networks. Paraprofessionals learn new job roles and have the opportunity to work with a broader range of students. General educators have more assistance in their

classroom, learn new collaborative roles, and appreciate the benefits of a more diverse classroom. Finally, special educators are empowered by being able to provide the benefits just noted to students with and without disabilities and develop more complex and effective professional relationships with other adults.

High schools continue to change to meet the ever evolving demands placed on them by their local communities, states and federal governments. As high schools are redesigned to more effectively support rigor, relevance, and relationships, peer support interventions can play a useful role. Two decades ago educational professionals considered equity and excellence as competing concepts in which only one or the other could be pursued. During the last decade we have learned that the two often go hand-in-hand and provide a synergy that makes each goal more readily achievable. Peer support interventions have developed and evolved during this same time period and have developed a strong set of evidence-based research findings to support their use and outline their benefits. We hope this overview of peer support techniques has interested TASH *Connections'* readers and that you may want to consider using these techniques if you are an educator or have your child's teacher consider these techniques if you are a parent. Just remember, that when using peer support interventions, everybody wins.

*Erik W. Carter is an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Lisa S. Cushing is an Associate Professor at the University of Illinois, Chicago. Craig H. Kennedy is a Professor at Vanderbilt University. For more information about this article, please contact Erik at ewcarter@wisc.edu.*

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