Building Inclusive High School Communities for Autistic Students

Lindsay F. Rentschler ID, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,
Kara A. Hume, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and
Jessica R. Steinbrenner, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Ms. Peckham is one of the assistant principals at Central High School, and as the former exceptional children (EC) department chair, she oversaw and supported the various EC programs as part of her administrative duties. Her building served a large number of students with autism in various programs and settings across the school, and although she felt good about the classroom services they were receiving, the recent school climate survey results concerned her. The response rate was low for students with disabilities broadly, and even fewer responses from the autistic population were returned. The indicators related to social connectedness and engagement for this subgroup of students were in the "developing" range (instead of "effective" or "highly effective," as she would have hoped). She knew a positive climate had effects on achievement and, more importantly from her perspective, that connectedness could protect against the development of mental health conditions, which impact the autistic population at higher rates.

Central High School had already partnered with the Center on Secondary Education for Students with Autism (CSESA) to build capacity across staff to better serve students with autism on campus, and Ms. Peckham was part of the team. She decided she would like to direct those efforts to build a more inclusive setting at Central so autistic students, and all students, felt more connected and engaged. Across the school year, Ms. Peckham and her colleagues worked to implement and embed strategies to build Central's community.

High schools have the potential to foster the growth of students' interests and social relationships beyond the classroom. Sports teams, performing and visual arts groups, special interest clubs, and service projects are some of the extracurricular activities on campus that provide students with opportunities for personal development and social inclusion. Students with autism are often excluded from these opportunities (Shattuck et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017) and, as a result, have fewer spaces to build friendships and experience feelings of community belonging. Contrary to common assumptions, most students with autism have the desire to participate in campus activities, make friends, and find social engagement (Bennett et al., 2018; Cresswell et al., 2019), but there are many barriers blocking access to social inclusion

on campus. A campus culture shift to greater inclusivity can benefit students with autism and other students with disabilities as well as the entire student population. In this article, five strategies are discussed for building a more inclusive school community by expanding access to activities outside the classroom on campus.

Social-Emotional Development in Adolescence

Adolescence is a time of physical, cognitive, and social-emotional growth in which adolescents explore their identity by forming a self-concept and self-esteem (American Psychological Association, 2002). This self-concept forms through experimentation with interests, relationships, image, and behavior. Participation in structured campus activities may provide opportunities for healthy adolescent identity formation (Guest, 2018). Through the process of selecting and participating in on-campus activities, adolescents can explore their interests, assert autonomy, and establish identity. Additionally, adolescents practice important interpersonal skills when they engage in these varied settings outside the academic classroom (Feraco et al., 2021). Adolescence is a launching pad into adulthood in which teenagers should develop both the academic skills and interpersonal skills, like engaging in discussions and negotiating group work, that will play an important role in their future education or employment (Chen et al., 2014; Connor et al., 2020). Opportunities to build these skills are essential for our students with autism, who experience social and communication challenges.

Barriers and Facilitators of Social Inclusion

Although high school students with autism may experience difficulties in social

situations given the social features associated with a diagnosis of autism, they too will often express the desire to connect with peers and participate in group activities (Bennett et al., 2018). However, due to a more nuanced social system and increased social expectations in high school, neurotypical peers may not include their autistic classmates in social activities due to perceived social and communication differences (Cresswell et al., 2019). As a result, students with autism experience loneliness and disconnection from their peers at higher rates than neurotypical students (Locke et al., 2010). Nearly half of high school students with autism report being the victim of bullying (Sterzing et al., 2012), and those being bullied have higher prosocial skill deficits and experience higher rates of peer rejection (Rose et al., 2011). This alienation may catalyze a vicious cycle in which negative social experiences discourage future attempts at social engagement and thus social skills do not improve. Furthermore, social skill deficits and social isolation are associated with higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide in autistic teens (Acker et al., 2018; Culpin et al., 2018). These mental health concerns have a profound impact on social and vocational involvement for autistic adolescents and young adults (Hagner et al., 2014). And these concerns are being carried into adulthood, as 60% of young adults with autism are experiencing two or more co-occurring mental health conditions, 58% do not attain stable employment or are underemployed, and 25% are socially disconnected (Roux et al., 2015).

A key venue for breaking the cycle and helping build peer relationships, interpersonal skills, and vocational skills is structured school activities. Extracurricular activities, like clubs, service-oriented groups, and athletics, have been shown to enhance soft skills, such as proactivity and perseverance (Feraco et al., 2021); furthermore, participation in work-study programs,

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vocational awareness events, or microenterprise programs predict postsecondary employment success for autistic students (Mazzotti et al., 2009). Yet, access to these structured school activities is often blocked for students with autism. Shattuck et al. (2011) found only one third of adolescents with autism were participating in group activities. The school community poses barriers to engagement in extracurricular activities for students with autism. These barriers may include a scarcity of inclusive learning practices (Carter & Hughes, 2013), the absence of communication scaffolding, limited time and flexibility for autistic students on a standard diploma track, staffing and expertise concerns (Hedges et al., 2014), and peer unfamiliarity with or misunderstanding of autism (Morris et al., 2021). Fostering a culture of schoolwide inclusivity can aid in supporting all students' participation in valuable campus activities.

Benefits of Inclusive Communities

When schools remove structural and social obstacles to participating in on-campus activities, all members of the campus community benefit. The social-emotional growth of all students can be impacted by a campus culture of inclusivity (Dean et al., 2020). By creating structured opportunities for social participation, venues are established for friendship formation. Friendships act as a buffer for anxiety and bullying (Bollmer et al., 2005), thus affording an opportunity to protect against some of the mental health concerns associated with isolation. Additionally, research shows that simply creating an inclusive environment is not protective, but when combined with disability awareness efforts, it can make a difference (Lindsay & Edwards, 2013). Exposure to and inclusion of students with disabilities, when paired with awareness interventions, often results in neurotypical students becoming more accepting and understanding of students different from themselves (Cremin et al., 2021) and protects against bullying (Humphrey & Hebron, 2014). Supporting the inclusion of autistic students across campus activities results in social-emotional benefits to all students (Travers & Carter, 2021).

> **Supporting the inclusion of autistic students across campus activities results in social-emotional benefits to all students.**

Ensuring access to campus activities can also improve academic achievement and play a key role in postsecondary transition planning for all students. Neurotypical peers that support the inclusion of students with autism often improve their own grades and school engagement (Carter et al., 2005). Additionally, club and campus group membership allows students to explore interests that may lead to a career. These activities also offer a more flexible format than academic classes, which leads to more time practicing social skills. During extracurricular activities, students are gaining valuable interpersonal skills that can benefit them in gaining and maintaining employment (Chen et al., 2014; Feraco et al., 2021).

Strategies for Building an Inclusive Community for Students With Autism

CSESA (https://csesa.fpg.unc.edu) was a 5-year research and development center funded by the Department of Education charged with examining the high school experiences for autistic high school students, developing or adapting and studying interventions for these students, and creating resources to support students, school staff, and family members to navigate these years successfully. The CSESA team, after observing and working in more than 60 high schools and partnering with over 1,000 project participants, identified the following five strategies to improve access to campus social and extracurricular activities for students with autism. Resources to support implementation of these strategies are available on the CSESA website.

Strategy 1: Leverage Existing Programs

The first step in building an inclusive campus community is to find venues where relationships between the students can be facilitated. Weaving efforts to foster a campuswide climate of inclusion into the ongoing activities of a high school campus may be more sustainable than trying to create many new or additional programs. There are likely some places or activities on campus where students with autism are already gathering. Identify those spaces and then work to build or expand these peer networks for the students with autism who have yet to find extracurricular activities to join. Find the clubs that attract your students, sports teams with your students as players or student managers, or lunchtime interest groups that align with your students' enthusiasms. Popular campus groups may include chess club, movie or anime groups, a Harry Potter club, drawing or arts groups, theater groups, fencing club, and or gaming groups. Additionally, look for the academic or elective classes that your students are taking that have embedded teamwork components or projects. Any of these preexisting venues can be leveraged to expand the inclusion of more students with autism.

Additionally, campus programs like service projects or microenterprises may be fun and enriching. Programs like packing weekend backpacks with food, working at the campus coffee stand, or gardening at the school's vegetable patch could each provide the student with valuable vocational skills in addition to social opportunities (Test et al., 2014). Any activity or program on campus could be a potential fit for a student with autism, so think broadly about what your campus has to offer.

Ms. Siano, the media center director at Central, also a parent of an autistic teen, was a key team member in the schoolwide efforts. She hosted several club meetings during lunchtimes, including the chess club and anime clubs (see **Figure 1**). *A number of autistic students regularly attended these meetings but, from her observations, were not fully integrated into conversations, social plans that occurred outside*

Figure 1 **Student gaming group meeting**

The Gamer's Guild was a popular club at Central, and a number of autistic students were already members but not fully integrated into club activities. Ms. Siano used the peer networks framework to help all club members become more cohesive and connected to each other.

of the club, and ongoing club conversations on WhatsApp. She decided these club meetings could be a great venue for peer networks, an intervention designed to more purposely build social connections outside the classroom, and she served as a facilitator to support club members in learning how to be more inclusive and interactive during club meetings and beyond. Ms. Siano watched club members become more aware of who was included in conversations and activities and shared her success with the Central and CSESA teams. Several other club facilitators and athletic team coaches were interested in trying out peer networks with their groups. Find information about how to implement peer networks at CSESA (n.d.-b).

Strategy 2: Start New Programs

If you are having trouble finding appropriate groups or venues on your campus, you can create new school programs or initiatives. To enhance the likelihood of participation, make the initiatives relevant to the current school culture. For example, if your school has a popular athletic program, start a spirit squad that includes kids with and without disabilities. Another way to raise visibility is to celebrate Autism Acceptance Month every April. Hosting assemblies in which

autistic adults speak to the school and planning a sensory-friendly school dance can get the whole school involved in understanding autistic people while having fun. Because students who have not had much contact with autistic peers may exhibit reluctance or less acceptance (Campbell et al., 2011), consider implementing a peer interaction training program to teach neurotypical students strategies for communicating with their autistic peers (Hughes et al., 2013).

Mr. Johnson, a school counselor, was eager to be involved to support this student population. Three autistic students with whom he worked were interested in starting a Neurodiversity Club at Central, and he agreed to serve as the club moderator for its inaugural year. Mr. Johnson knew the research on the positive impact of affinity clubs—student-organized social clubs that affirm students' identification (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexual orientation)—and was curious how a club related to neurodiversity may meet student needs and foster inclusivity. The interested students worked to create paper and digital materials about the club and advertised across the school, inviting any student who identified as neurodiverse (e.g., with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autistism, or dyslexia) to join. They planned the initial

*meeting (which included free snacks) and brainstormed activities and topics they wanted to propose to the larger group. Seven students attended the initial lunchtime meeting, and they drafted a plan to celebrate Neurodiversity Week in March (see **Figure 2** and Neurodiversity Celebration Week, n.d., for more ideas).*

Strategy 3: Find Common Interests Among Students

Friendships are often built upon shared interests. Therefore, once you have identified what your campus has to offer, match students' passions and hobbies with the clubs or activities that are taking place on campus. It can be helpful to collaborate across the faculty as teachers who see the students every day in class may be aware of interests. Families are also a great resource to discover interests that may not be as evident in the school environment. Discuss the various group and activity options individually with each autistic student to find out what each student is interested in. Present various options on campus that may align with those interests, then let the student select a club, activity, or project. For students who continue their enthusiasm for all things Disney, they may want to try the drama

Figure 2 Hallway display of autism strengths

As part of Neurodiversity Celebration Week, the club provided information about various learning differences, including autism, for students across the school. Different classes participated by generating content to share in hallway displays.

club or chorus. A student who loves to draw may want to join the anime club or help to plan the school's annual art show. Students can build important friendships in service activities, career exploration groups, school committees, athletic teams, or clubs where they can share common interests with peers.

Ms. Peckham knew that some of Central's autistic students would need individual support to find an activity on campus that may match their interests. Before the school's club fair, she provided coverage for one day that allowed each of the EC case managers to set up brief individual meetings with their students to learn more about their interests and hobbies and to provide some information about clubs, classes, or school activities that may align or a contact person who may be helpful (e.g., art department chair, service learning contact, chess club moderator). When the classes visited the club fair, the teachers and students had ideas on who to visit and what information to gather about their participation. This individual preparation and

coaching led to a much higher involvement rate. The use of a community and school resource map (CSRM) can help school-based teams identify what activities and resources are on campus (and off) as a way to better connect students and families to the larger school community (see Figure 3).

Strategy 4: Find Champions on Staff

Effective staffing is an important driver of any program's success (Metz et al., 2015). Identify those adults on campus that are enthusiastic about inclusion. You may find allies among the teachers,

paraprofessionals, counselors, social workers, coaches, and administrators. It can be helpful to find the adults with social capital among staff or students. Their connections often help to bring in other staff who are interested in supporting inclusion efforts or students who might be helpful in inclusive groups. Widening the network may even allow for efforts to cross to other schools as teachers discuss the program with colleagues on other campuses. When approaching other staff, give them concrete ways to support inclusion. Staff may be able to support inclusion by welcoming and supporting autistic students into the clubs or activities that they advise. After finding champions, it is important to foster collaboration. This could include a quarterly meeting with champions or using an online collaborative tool (e.g., Slack, Teams) or group app (e.g., WhatsApp, GroupMe) for ongoing communication. Building an inclusive climate across campus will require key allies that span the various groups at your school.

Ms. Peckham pulled support from across the school—EC and general education teachers, counselors, the school social worker, and even the cafeteria and front office staff were crucial in setting the tone for an inclusive space at Central. She knew that getting the support of several key school leaders would help the initiatives to successfully launch, specifically some of the coaching and physical education staff members, the head of the drama program, and the coordinator of the Advanced Placement program at Central. Ms. Peckham and Mr. Johnson met individually with these faculty members and shared the climate survey results and their proposed ideas related to the initiatives to support inclusivity, and they gathered their feedback. Their conversations also focused on personal connections they had to autistic individuals in their own lives and students they served. Once on board, these faculty and staff leveraged

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Figure 3 **Student club contact sheet listed in Apex high school's CSRM**

Apex High School Student Clubs

Club Name	Advisor	Email Contact
Apex Peak Players	Winter	
Application Club	Moncelle	
Boost Club	Hatch	
Brain Games Trivia Team	Telford, Coffey	
Chess Club	Telford	
Cupball	Sands	
Debate	Nordt	
DECA	Obaigbena	
Domestic Violence Awareness and Prevention	Moncelle	
Drafting	R. Myers	
Environmental Club	Nagel, Thomason, Piper	
eSports	Oltmans	
Excel Club	Nordt	
FCA	Ferguson, Spaulding, Duncan	
FCCLA	Harrison, Hoskins	
FFA	R. Thomas	
French	Pilling	
Game Development	C. Smith	
German Club	Maseman	
German Honor Society	Maseman	
GSA	Fackler-Bretz, Pitelli, Teel	
Henna Tattoos	Purtee	
Hip Hop Dance Team	Odom	

CSRM can include a list of school clubs and the contact information for each one. This can help all students know what is available, can help to match student interest to club possibilities, and helps to facilitate communication between interested students and club moderators. See Apex High School's (n.d.) full CSRM.

their connections at Central to support the full-school initiatives to promote inclusivity in the clubs and teams they led and became champions for the ongoing efforts to enhance the school climate. The staff sustained their group's mission by forming a faculty committee focused on inclusion.

Strategy 5: Provide Initial and Continuing Support

Teachers and staff can be trained on supporting autistic students at faculty or department meetings with recurring agenda time for discussions on implementation strategies. Pairing ongoing communication with coaching as needed will support and sustain teacher efforts. In addition to providing initial and ongoing support to the staff that facilitate inclusion, support should be given to all the students as well. Once the autistic student has chosen an activity to join, prepare the existing group for the student's arrival. Start by gauging the current group members' interest and knowledge of autism. If the students do not have much familiarity with autism, arrange for them to receive some introductory information on autism. Next, present tips on effective ways to communicate with the specific autistic student who will soon be joining the group. This may include advising students on how to communicate with a person who uses an augmentative communication device or someone who engages in self-stimulatory or self-soothing behaviors and to allow time for the neurotypical student to ask questions. There are many more ways to support the introduction of new members to the group. The specific strategies for use with your students will vary based on their needs. See *Figure 4* for a list of possible strategies. This peer preparation work can also be tied to any existing antibullying campaigns. Working closely with other staff who are supporting inclusion efforts across a range of student populations to mirror positive and inclusive language used in other programs across campus can aid and reinforce student understanding.

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Figure 4 Strategies for introducing autistic students to student group

Strategy	Description
Identify someone to support in the new setting	The support person can be a paraprofessional or teacher, but whenever possible, it is ideal to identify a willing and helpful peer to support as autistic teens have expressed their preference for engaging in social situations without an adult present (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2016).
Obtain meeting agendas ahead of time	The autistic student and support person should preview the agenda for each meeting before the meeting. This may minimize surprises during group activities and prime the autistic student for engagement.
Limit changes to how meetings have run in the past	Try not to overhaul the way meetings are run when the new autistic member joins. This may alienate the new student. However, some changes or additions to meetings, like visual supports or new seating arrangements, should be adopted for accessibility.
Keep meetings predictable	Creating a consistent meeting routine may help the autistic student feel comfortable. When an upcoming meeting will be different, try to give the autistic student as much notice as possible.
Dedicate time to introductions	As the autistic student transitions into the group, provide time and activities for introductions. This may include conversation starters to support the group in sharing their interests and getting to know one another.
Suggest team-building activities	Supplying the group with team-building activities can deepen understanding and trust. Examples include collaboratively creating a group code of conduct, personal anecdote bingo, campus scavenger hunt, two truths and a lie, virtual escape rooms, the silent line-up game, etc.

year, remember to maintain open lines of communication with all group members. Solicit feedback from everyone and help students to troubleshoot any issues that arise. Revisit the implemented support strategies with students at least once per quarter and adjust as needed. Providing ongoing support to the whole group in these ways will help sustain inclusion efforts.

The CSESA team at Central knew that to improve school climate, initiatives had to move beyond the EC staff and into the general education setting. Peer networks were going well, but they decided to add a schoolwide initiative related to inclusion. First, on one of the full-school professional development days at the beginning of the next school year, they presented a workshop called "Understanding Autism" (see CSESA, n.d.-b). The workshop provided some didactic information on how autism may impact student learning and behavior in the classroom as well as ample opportunity for departments to respond to work as a team and brainstorm how to support their students. This 2-hour workshop was followed up by mini trainings in each department on peer

*supports—strategies that peers can use to facilitate the success of their classmates with autism as well as to improve their own collaboration skills. One teacher in each department served as the "point" person for their team and helped their colleagues form peer support arrangements around their autistic students (see **Figure 5**). Ms. Peckham and Mr. Johnson provided ongoing coaching and support to the teams across the year as they implemented. For everything you need to know about peer supports and how to implement, see CSESA (n.d.-a).*

Conclusion

Ms. Peckham, the CSESA team, and the Central community knew these efforts would take time to implement and even longer to truly influence school climate. They wanted, however, to track some metrics that let them know along the way if they were making meaningful changes. They started by documenting how many EC students were members of campus extracurriculars and saw that number increase by 37% after 1 year of implementation of the five strategies. The membership of the Neurodiversity Club grew to 19 regular members from the initial seven (they renamed themselves "The Beautiful

Minds Club"), and 14 general education teachers were regularly implementing peer support strategies (and had formed a professional learning community to discuss monthly). They posted their CSRM on their school web site and tracked access and monitored data on school climate proxy surveys they sent out each semester. Indices of engagement and connectedness were slowly rising, and Ms. Peckham was hopeful; those changes would show up on the formal measure they administered every 2 years. Her ultimate hope was that these efforts would alter the trajectory for autistic students—reducing the burden of mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety; increasing their sense of belonging at Central; and ultimately improving both their in-school and postsecondary outcomes.

Staff at high schools have the ability to increase access for autistic students to all the groups and activities on campus. Staff can leverage existing programs, start new groups or neurodiversity awareness initiatives, connect students with common interests, find champions on staff to help, and provide continuing support. By implementing the five strategies, staff facilitate a shift to a more inclusive campus.

Figure 5 Inclusive cooking class

Students in the culinary class learned how to better support their autistic classmates so they were more actively engaged in classroom activities and more involved in social opportunities inside and outside the classroom.

Much like Ms. Peckham experienced, these changes take time, but by tracking how many students with autism are participating in extracurricular activities and monitoring school climate surveys, staff can observe inclusion improvements leading to mental health, academic, and social benefits for all participating students.

ORCID ID

Lindsay F. Rentschler iD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4012-9787

Lindsay F. Rentschler, *Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill;* **Kara A. Hume,** *Associate Professor, School of Education, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill;* **Jessica R. Steinbrenner,** *Associate Professor, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*

Address correspondence concerning this article to Lindsay F. Rentschler, School of Education, University of North Carolina at Campus Box 3500, Peabody Hall, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3500 (email: LFR@live.unc.edu).

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