

Disability Awareness Day

By Karen Barthlow

Sixth grade students at Pine Grove Middle School participate in a yearly "Disability Awareness Day." Pine Grove Middle School has a diverse culture which includes autistic students, deaf and hard of hearing students, and wheelchair bound students. During this special day, all sixth grade students are run through various simulations of different disabilities which include visual, attention deficit hyper activity disorder, cerebral palsy, wheelchair bound, autism, and deaf culture. After this day, students in reading and language arts go to the library and complete a research project on the disability of their choice. A report and a set of bookmarks are completed by all students. The bookmarks are distributed in the community to promote greater understanding and appreciation for differences.

Best Practice 1: What recognized community need was met by your project (e.g. health, education, environmental or public safety need)?

Sixth grade students are curious about students who are in either their special area classes or their core subjects. They frequently ask about what the interpreter is doing, why a student has a service dog, and why a student needs to have a test read to them. Most students also have experience with disabled individuals in their family or community. The goal of this project is to make them feel comfortable in all settings. Once students develop a better understanding of various physical, developmental, and mental challenges individuals might face, they then are asked to help educate others through creating a report and bookmarks with facts about different disabilities which are distributed in the community. The project goal is to increase awareness and appreciation of differences.

Best Practice 2: How was the project connected to school curriculum (e.g. what course outcomes were met and/or how did the project reinforce or enhance student academic learning)?

Our service-learning project was connected to the school curriculum through reading, math, technology, art, and language arts.

- Reading- students learned about various disabilities by reading about them. "The day my silent brother spoke" was a very poignant story about a boy with autism that was enjoyed by many of the students.
- Math – students measured and cut out the bookmarks to the specific requirements.
- Technology – students went to the computer lab to research their disability on the internet.
- Art – students created visually stimulating bookmarks as a project.
- Language Arts – students used their research skills to complete a written report.

Best Practice 3: How did you reflect on your experience throughout the project?

Students wrote public service announcements that were read on the morning announcements about various disabilities. Using this information, students reflected through discussion.

Best Practice 4: How did students take leadership roles and take responsibility for the success of the project?

Students wrote reports and held a disability awareness fair where other students, parents, and other people from the community were invited to attend. Students had to complete a tri-fold display and be able to give a short talk on their particular topic.

Best Practice 5: What community partners did you work with on this project (e.g. non-profits, civic organizations, business that provided donations, etc.)?

Students were required to complete two bookmarks. Each bookmark was to contain the name of the disability and have three bulleted facts. An illustration was also required. On the back of the bookmark the student was required to have a website address where someone could find additional information. These bookmarks were taken to the Carney Library and the Perry Hall Library where they were given out to the library patrons.

Best Practice 6: How did you prepare and plan ahead for the project?

To plan ahead and prepare for this student service learning project we began by;

- Requesting and receiving administration approval
- Developing a timeline
- Scheduling a motivating speaker
- Scheduling all students through the disability simulations
- Scheduling the time in the library and computer labs
- Obtaining supplies for the bookmarks
- Laminating bookmarks
- Scheduling the disability awareness fair

Best Practice 7: What knowledge and skills did students develop through this project?

Our sixth grade students developed a sense of what it is like to have a disability. This knowledge allows them to show compassion in good times (helping a disabled student in physical education) or in bad times (when an autistic student is scared by the fire alarm). Many students volunteered to become active morning helpers in both the autistic and the deaf classrooms.

All sixth grade students improved their skills in reading, math, technology, and language arts by completing this project. The biggest gain was made in the friendships and understanding that the sixth grade students show towards the disabled students.