

TO: WCSD Co-Curricular Committee

FROM: Tiffany Loken
Director of Special Education

RE: Middle School Best Buddies Proposal

DATE: May 28, 2026

One of our goals in the special education department is to work hard to develop new ways for our students to grow and learn in an inclusive environment, both academically and socially. We are proposing the implementation of the Best Buddies program at Waunakee Middle School. The Best Buddies program is a national program designed to foster meaningful relationships between students with and without disabilities. By creating an inclusive and supportive environment, the program aims to promote social integration, acceptance, and friendship among all students, irrespective of their abilities.

Background:

The Best Buddies program has been successfully implemented at Waunakee High School, with our most recent level of participation hitting almost 100 students! Deanne Lensert, incoming High School Principal, recently expressed her feelings about the program stating, “Best Buddies has truly helped to change our culture at the High School.” This program pairs students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) with their peers who do not have disabilities, creating lasting friendships and breaking down barriers that often exist in traditional school settings.

Objectives:

1. Promote Inclusivity: The Best Buddies program will contribute to creating a more inclusive school environment by breaking down social barriers and fostering a sense of belonging for all students.
2. Encourage Social Interaction: By facilitating one-on-one friendships and group activities, the program encourages social interaction and communication skills development among all students.
3. Develop Empathy and Understanding: Best Buddies promotes empathy and understanding among students by providing opportunities for them to learn about each other's strengths, challenges, and unique qualities.
4. Enhance Leadership and Advocacy Skills: The program offers leadership opportunities for students to serve as ambassadors, advocates, and peer mentors, helping to develop essential life skills.

Implementation Plan:

1. Program Introduction: The program was introduced initially at Waunakee High School and we would like to use our high school Best Buddy chapter to help recruit middle school students to join this new group at the middle school.
2. Recruitment: During the recruitment process, we are emphasizing the importance of creating lasting friendships and fostering an inclusive community.

3. **Training**: Provide training sessions for Best Buddies participants, including guidance on effective communication, understanding disabilities, and promoting inclusivity.
4. **Pairing Process**: Thoughtfully pair students with and without disabilities based on shared interests, personalities, and compatibility.
5. **Regular Activities**: At the high school level, we have weekly gatherings for students to do fun activities and we also try to incorporate some outings, like bowling etc.
6. **Budget**: Because the development of this organization was initiated by the District, I am requesting that we start paying our two advisors who are interested in leading this group at the middle school level.

Conclusion:

The Best Buddies program aligns with the District's commitment to providing an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students. By implementing this program, we have an opportunity to strengthen our school community, promote understanding and acceptance, and create lasting friendships that will positively impact the lives of our students.