

## **SNAP**

Morristown, NJ

### **Special Needs Athletic Programs**

#### **Goals**

The original goal for the SNAP Autism Speak grant was to create awareness of kids with Autism within the school and broader community of Morris County, New Jersey. To immerse children in grades k-12 in the experience of what it felt like to have autism and in a broader context what it means to have special needs and be left out of the mainstream or worse made fun of.

As with most projects it's when you begin to execute, that you find out that your proposal needs to be modified to fit the changing dynamics of implementation. Fortunately for us it was easy to modify the program and those modifications only enhanced the outcomes for our targeted populations.

#### **Program Adaptation**

First we found that beyond awareness with our 5- 8 year old it was not possible to put them through the rigors of the training. For some of them the limitations that we wanted them to experience were already real as they themselves are in physical and mental development.

Our second awareness was that we would have great difficulty getting big chunks of time at the Middle School and High School to do the training for all students.

While the Morris School district is not large it does have a student population close to 5,000 students in grades PK-12 with diversity economically and with a large Hispanic and African American population.

Our biggest realization was that we had to find a way to transform these students and to build a model for sustainability. It became clear that we would be a one off program if we could not have an impact on changing the culture of the school.

## **District Profile and Target Populations**

The District population of 4800 kids in 10 schools from Morristown, Township of Morris and Morris Plains is 56% white, 24% Hispanic and 14% African American. 26% get free lunch.

**Targeted schools:** the grades 3-5 schools were are the primary population with other target groups at the High School, Middle School and other private schools and organization. The Girl Scouts, Peck School, High School gym teacher and the Honor society are some examples.



## **First Steps of the project:**

### **Tools for awareness and training**

Create PPT presentation on Autism and our goals (see example)

Create a comprehensive workshop that completely immersed the students in the experience of having autism. (see picture below)

*Our training modules were developed with the guidance of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, a school education reform group founded at Teachers College of Columbia University.*

The modules created dealt with sensory issue, balance, isolation (no social interaction) - we chose not to add a module on taste and touch as they are not easily replicated without endangering the students. We chose instead to add modules of other impairments that could immediately model overall special needs which we needed to do given the inclusion nature of schools. We created visual impairment, dexterity and mobility.



Purchasing equipment for the immersion was also an obstacle in that it had to meet two goals - create a realistic but safe model of a disability.

### **Commitment from the School District**

**It was essential to get the commitment of the principal of the school for our project to be a success.**

We had difficulty with scheduling at the high schools and middle schools due to the departmental nature of their classes.

We also had difficulty with the schedule in that SNAP is a program for kids by kids. This means that the training needed to be done by our middle school and High School students that had been through a comprehensive 4 hours of training. It required that we get release time for our kids from class to do the training. This too was a logistical hurdle we overcame with support from their schools and the transportation to get to the other schools.

### **Refining the targeted populations**

The PK-2 schools became awareness sessions and we did assemblies for all three schools that represented a population of 895 students.

Our target became the 3-5 schools which each had a population of 300-400 students. It then took a coordinated plan with each school to allocate time over the course of 2-3 weeks to schedule training.

“...permanent fixture at Thomas Jefferson Elementary School.”

**Principal**



*"....I think the students came away with empathy towards children with disabilities as well as any student who may experience not feeling welcomed or not belonging."*

Dr. Strubing, Peck School

### Training Timeframe

The sessions were all one hour in length with a brief presentation; and then immediately the students were split into groups for the modules. Given the hands on nature of the training we have to train in groups of 25. **We conducted 109 training sessions at 14 institutions over the one year time frame. This represents over 5000 hours of training and mentor time commitment. This was a huge commitment of our student trainers.**

*"For me this has changed who I am inside and out"... a High School mentor*

### Other Target Populations

Given the success of the program at the 3-5 schools, we were inundated with requests from other organizations and schools. Additional training was done for multiple Girl Scout troops, St Peter's Episcopal Church and two private schools in the area. Morristown Board has held a general assembly for all their students and we are in the planning stages of making our program an integral component of the required service program.

We also had an incredible response from the Peck School, a very prestigious PK-8 school that has made our training and Ambassadors Program an integral part of their instructional program. The kids need to write about it and do outside of school projects at a private school for special needs children.

We also held multiple training sessions for teachers, particularly the gym teachers at the High School that had us back for a follow up session, which speaks highly of the quality of our training.

## Transformation and Sustainability

Our learning curve taught us that we wanted our program to have a transformational effect on these students and the schools themselves. We also wanted the program to have sustainability. To that end we created the Ambassador Program.

### Ambassador Program

The overall goal for the **SNAP Ambassador Program** is to reach a sustainable system where the older children (with the help of a supervisor) will be able to successfully teach their peers about special needs awareness and acceptance through the SNAP Training. The students are rewarded through acts of kindness and the integration of all special needs students into the school culture.



**To date 1000 kids have participated in the Ambassador program at four schools in the Morris School District.**

### Sustainability

The SNAP sustainability model can only take hold by becoming an integral component of the school's culture. The school must look for students who really understand the message of being a good person with the ability to go outside of their comfort zone. Students acknowledged for their efforts will be rewarded at the school's monthly assembly. The first time a student is recognized they will be honored on the SNAP website as well as receiving an honorary SNAP certificate. The second time a student is recognized, they will receive a SNAP T-Shirt, signifying their hard work and constant effort to become a better person. The third time a student is recognized they will be offered the opportunity to help train and educate younger students receiving the SNAP training program.

*Students who were trained immediately invited the students with special needs to have lunch with them*

Principal, Sussex ave School

## Formal Evaluation

Over the course of 2010-11 and 2011-2012 school years we trained over 2,700 kids and adults. This represents over 5000 hours of training and mentor commitment.

While the Bellini Autism Social Skills Profile was used informally for our evaluation, it was used as a metric for our follow up with the Ambassador Program to measure the interaction with the typically developing children during the school day. Acts of kindness and lunch buddies were two measures we evaluated.

The best comment of our success came from a fourth grader whose mother was concerned that she would be made fun of because her pants were too short. The little girl's response was, "Mom, don't worry about kids making fun of me. Since we did SNAP no one does that anymore!"

*Watching the faces of the kids interacting with the mentors leaves an amazing feeling with me for the rest of the week."*

*Parent*

## Going Forward

We would like to develop an integrated social interaction program for our kids and typically developing children. We would create a "place" and a program that would facilitate the ongoing social development for both cohorts. This "place" would be not unlike the commons of a college community center. Parts would have the look and feel of home: couches, chairs, TV, Wii and a snack area. It would be constructed by our kids, who would also run social events, be they a DJ for a music night or some other social event. We would have an off campus event, sports game attendance, or music concerts or trips for events to NYC that are convenient for our kids.