The involvement of high school students with disabilities in after-school and cocurricular activities declined nationwide between 2001 and 2006 (Institute of Education Sciences, n.d.). The Partners Club at East Anchorage High School in Alaska, however, is an example of how such activities can support relationships between nondisabled students and students with disabilities.

The club organizes social activities for nondisabled students and students with disabilities in hopes of fostering understanding and acceptance. As the club’s adviser said, “Partners Club members are learning how to talk with one another. How to treat one another with respect. I’ve seen it happen in the halls. If a student mimics or makes fun of a student with a disability, one of the Partners Club members will go to the student and speak up [and will say] that it is not right to tease him.”

**Club Activities**

There is wide variety in club activities. Some pair students with and without disabilities for bowling, basketball, skiing, snowboarding, and track and field events. During other activities, all club members participate together, such as going to the movies, attending school dances, attending school sporting events, eating lunch, and participating in community-based events. When students are partnered, the partners must decide how they will participate in an activity together, regardless of their individual ability levels. For example, during a ski trip, the partners are required to ski together for a mutually agreed upon length of time, after which they can ski separately.

Decisions about group activities are made during weekly meetings. “We make decisions about what we are going to do,” said one student with a disability. “Like going to the movies, going bowling, going on a picnic, or going to the school dance…. This weekend we are going to work together at a horror house and scare people for Halloween. We do all
kinds of stuff like that.” Because Partners Club is run informally, students are welcome to participate in all activities, even if they have not attended the weekly meetings. If a student feels uncomfortable with a particular activity, he or she is not required to participate but can simply be a cheerleader or a spectator.

Each year there is at least one overnight skiing and snowboarding trip. Students leave one day, spend the night at the ski area, and then return the next day. Parents of Club members chaperone the event and provide transportation. The Hill Top Ski Area located near Anchorage provides passes for skiing and snowboarding free of charge.

On Teacher Appreciation Day and Security Appreciation Day, Club members pair up to make and deliver coffee to teachers and security personnel. Other popular school-related activities include attending school dances as a group, cheering together in the bleachers at a school sporting event, and going to the school district’s haunted house on Halloween night. The club also runs a coffee and espresso stand at the school every morning from 7:00 a.m. to 7:30 a.m. to raise money to attend nonsporting events.

**Club Meetings**
The first Partners Club meeting of each school year is a general information meeting for nondisabled students who have expressed an interest in
joining the club. At the meeting, a representative from the Anchorage chapter of Special Olympics Alaska leads a training session about disabilities, including advice about how to interact with students with disabilities. In collaboration with the club adviser, the chapter has refined this training and developed an orientation guide for nondisabled students to teach them about their roles and responsibilities as Partners Club members.

At the second Partners Club meeting of each school year, club members are encouraged to offer ideas about activities they would like to do together. The club adviser helps the students develop a tentative calendar of activities for each month and determine which day to meet each week.

Weekly club meetings are usually held during lunch in one of the general education classrooms or the main school cafeteria. After everybody eats, club members spend 10 minutes taking care of business, sharing information about an upcoming event, or reviewing changes in a planned club activity. During the last 20 minutes, club members play games together, such as UNO and Guess Who?

**Recruiting Club Members**

During the initial years of forming the Partners Club, the adviser personally recruited five or six nondisabled students each year. The adviser encouraged well-known student leaders—such as sports team captains, cheerleaders, student government leaders, school club leaders, and students with excellent academic achievement—to become club members. The club adviser also asked teachers to recommend nondisabled students who might like to become members.

All students who receive special education services are informed about the club by their case workers and during special education classes. Parents of students with disabilities learn about the club in a letter that is sent to students’ homes from the special education department. Because the club is a cocurricular activity, all student participation is voluntary.

After three years, the club became known as “one of the clubs” at East Anchorage and annual membership has grown incrementally to 35–40 members. Membership is diverse. One member said that Partners Club includes “kids who are hearing impaired, snowboarder type guys that are just regular education students, kids in wheelchairs, kids who have difficulty thinking, jocks, cheerleader-type girls, kids with cognitive problems, popular kids, [and] bookworms.”

Currently, new members are recruited by current members. Students also request to join after learning about the Partners Club through general school announcements; word of mouth; signs posted around the school; the club’s photo album, which is displayed in a hallway showcase; or the Partners Club Web site.

Sometimes, however, the adviser selects potential club members. “Occasionally, Partners Club members tell me if other students are picking on a special education student,” she said. “One way I have handled this kind of problem is to have the ‘perpetrators’ come into the Life Skills class to work with the special education students.
instead of giving the [perpetrators] detention or suspension. Two or three of the students who have done this are now Partners Club members."

**Club Advisers**
A vital component of the continuing success of the Partners Club is collaboration between three teachers. The Life Skills special education teacher takes on the responsibility of the “lead adviser,” with the assistance of two regular education teachers. These three teachers volunteer their time, receive no compensation for their involvement, and attend all weekly club meetings. They are usually present at such club activities as off-campus athletic events, social outings, and community-based activities.

Special Olympics provides support through a monthly phone meeting with the club advisers and an e-mail discussion group that helps keep local Partners Club advisers informed about upcoming Special Olympics activities or events. The monthly phone conference also provides a means for club advisers from different schools to describe the activities at each of their schools, share ideas, and offer advice.

**Parent Involvement**
Parents of students with disabilities and nondisabled students are encouraged to become involved in Partners Club and are regularly informed about club activities through letters and phone calls. Many parents volunteer to help out with student transportation and chaperone duties for off-campus activities, such as movies or pizza parties. Parents also go to watch club members participate in events and offer personal encouragement.

Many parents are encouraged by the benefits the club offers their children. “When I brought my daughter to register this year, it almost brought tears to my eyes to watch all these kids go, ‘Hey, Melissa. How was your summer? What did you do exciting?’” one parent said. “And my daughter would call them by name. I mean these were friends! They knew her. She knew them.... They weren’t in her classes, but [they were] in the hallway, treating her like a real student.”

Another parent said that “not all parents get involved. Many of the students are from single-parent families.... For me it really helps to see my boy with other boys and girls laughing, bowling, and going to the movies. He’s severely disabled physically and cognitively. What makes him most happy at school is eating with other kids, not just the kids from his classroom.”

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**East Anchorage High School**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location: Anchorage, AK</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grades: 9–12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment: 2,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community: Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics: 42% White, 18.3% Asian/Pacific, 12.9% Black, 12.6% Native Alaskan, 9% Hispanic, 2.9% multiethnic, 1.4% American Indian; 40% free or reduced-price lunch eligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative team: 1 principal and 5 assistant principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty: 122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff: 40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Who doesn't love a sledding party?
An important benefit of parent involvement is that parents of non-disabled students often learn more about a particular disability and become more supportive of their child forming friendships with students with disabilities. Another benefit is the relationships that form between club members and parents. “I have become very good friends with a couple of the Special Education parents because they are so involved with their kid and Partners Club,” one student said. “They are so grateful because the club lets their kid do sports because it is kind of hard for their kid to be on a regular team with all those straight kids.”

**Scaling Up**

After beginning at East Anchorage in the late 1990s, the Partners Club grew and can now be found in all of Anchorage’s high schools. As the number of clubs has increased in other high schools in Alaska, joint activities involving club members from other schools have started to occur with more frequency. For example, once a month the East Anchorage Partners Club meets with another local Partners Club for a joint activity, such as bowling or a movie. A bowling match held three years ago between three Anchorage Clubs has evolved into a statewide tournament. Most recently, the East Anchorage High School Partners Club has taken the lead in organizing an annual joint downhill skiing and snowboarding event at the ski area near Anchorage.

The proliferation of Partners Clubs didn’t happen by accident. Special Olympics Alaska has helped spread the word of East Anchorage Partners Club’s success. During a recent student government conference, Special Olympics Alaska staff members helped club members conduct a workshop and produced a video about the workshop. The video was then widely disseminated to other high schools throughout Alaska.

Students can see that involvement has left a legacy. “We all flew in the same plane to the Alaska State Youth Leadership Conference,” said the junior class president. “I led our session about the Partners Club at East Anchorage High School and the three Partners Club members with disabilities were right there for the entire session. A lot of schools started Partners Club since then. I like to think our session had a lot to do with them starting.”

**REFERENCE**


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