

**Harley Anderson, Program Manager Best Buddies Utah**  
**Presentation before the 2017 Social Services Appropriations Subcommittee**  
**July 26, 2017**

Good morning. I am Harley Anderson, and I have managed Best Buddies school-based inclusion programs for children and adults with disabilities in Utah since 2015. Founded in 1989, Best Buddies is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Our mission is to provide opportunities for one-to-one friendships, integrated employment, and leadership development for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Utah's first Best Buddies chapters launched in 1991 at Brigham Young, Utah State, and Weber State. During the past academic year, our 14 school-based programs at middle schools, high schools, and colleges had 970 participants with and without disabilities, with a positive impact on 9,700 people around the state.

You may ask why Best Buddies is needed in our schools and communities. I can tell you what studies tell us – that relationships and interactions with peers are: “important elements needed in competent social skill development,” during the childhood of a student with intellectual disabilities, and they: “contribute to increased social competence, attainment of educational goals, friendship development, and enhanced quality of life.” (Asher and Coie, 1990) However, today there are still a variety of social and physical barriers that inhibit opportunities for meaningful interactions between students with IDD and their typical peers.

Physical barriers, for example, include classroom environments. According to Utah's most recent Individual's with Disabilities Education Act Part-B data, 60% of Utah's students

with intellectual disabilities spend less than 40% of their day in a regular classroom. This is nearly 11% higher than the national total. What that means is that students with disabilities spend little time with typical peers, so they don't have the chance to develop appropriate social skills. Those typical peers also don't have the chance to get to understand the abilities those with disabilities have.

Social barriers include the "difficulty performing an array of important social skills," that a student with disabilities might experience, as well as a typical peer's lack of confidence "in their skills and knowledge to interact with their classmates who have IDD." (Copeland et al., 2004) The barriers between the student groups intensifies as they move from primary to secondary school due to fluctuating classrooms, lecture-dominated instructional arrangements, and the heightened emphasis on academics. (Carter & Hughes, 2005)

The isolation that these students face will continue to affect them as they age out of school. Researchers have found that social skills are essential for holding a job. (Holmes, 2003) For example, due to limited opportunities to practice social interaction during adolescence, it is difficult for adults with disabilities to mingle and network, which makes holding a job especially challenging. While employees with developmental disabilities "are generally able to handle well the tasks required of them at work, the social interaction which others manage with ease often presents unexpected hurdles." (Holmes and Fillar, 2000) Compounding the issue, if barriers and their effects are not addressed, typical peers may believe that an environment of separation is normal. They may, subsequently, perpetuate exclusion in their future work places and communities.

These barriers and their harmful effects on both student groups create a: “need for incorporating support based interventions in which aspects of school environments are arranged to promote peer interaction.” (Carter and Hughes, 2005) Without formal opportunities to get to know one another, adolescents with and without disabilities are unlikely to cross the social barrier and develop true social connections on their own.

The unique school-based inclusion programs created by Best Buddies, fills this service gap An evaluation of Best Buddies concluded that adolescents with IDD involved in one-to-one friendships through Best Buddies, showed, “lower frequencies of peer victimization, better adaptive behavior, higher levels of self-esteem, and fewer psychological symptoms” than those not matched in the program. In addition, the same evaluation concluded that, “‘Best Buddy’ relationships were similar to friendships with best friends, with additional levels of support, nurturing and ‘scaffolding’ in skill development.” Participation in Best Buddies makes students with disabilities both college and career ready by supporting the development of essential social skills.

Over this past weekend, 14 leaders from Utah’s Best Buddies chapters joined over 2,300 Best Buddies participants from around the world at the 28<sup>th</sup> Annual Best Buddies International Leadership Conference at the University of Indiana. Heading into the 2017-18 academic year, with the support of Best Buddies staff, students will use these leadership tools to help demolish the longstanding barriers that have prevented their friends with disabilities from fully engaging within their communities and schools.

I am honored to speak to you on behalf of the thousands of the participants who have benefitted from our inclusion programs. I ask that you consider investing in a more inclusive future for Utah by appropriating \$50,000 for Best Buddies for FY 2019. Thank you, and I would be glad to answer questions.

Best Buddies Chapters

Bingham High School  
Bonneville High School  
Brigham Young University  
Layton High School  
Murray High School  
Pleasant Grove High School  
Provo High School  
Riverton High School  
University of Utah  
Utah State University  
Viewmont High School  
Weber High School  
Weber State University  
Weilenmann School of Discovery