

Section 6-B – Links Program

A. Definition of a LINKS Program

LINKS (Peer-to-Peer Support) elective course/credit programs represent one model of 21st Century instructional design that incorporates applied (experiential) learning in a non-traditional manner. LINKS is based on long-standing national research and is an evidence-based model that is documented to have multiple learning outcomes for both students with ASD and students enrolled in the elective course/credit program.

Peer-to-Peer support (the evidence and research base common name) or peer mediated learning is well documented as an evidence based practice for pupils with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders, 2010; National Standards Project, 2010).

The implementation of LINKS in Michigan has been supported under State Board of Education approved grant criteria and a long-standing grant initiative awarded to Grand Valley State University by the Superintendent of Public Instruction. The initiative, State Autism Resources and Training (StART), provides the training to district staff on the implementation of LINKS.

1. The LINKS program offers several evidence based outcomes:

- For the pupil with ASD, a LINKS peer (the LINK student) models typical academic and social behavior in educational environments
- For the LINK pupil, the experiential learning provides progressive knowledge regarding awareness and understanding of disabilities (Carter, Hughes, Copeland & Breen, 2001; Copeland et al., 2004)) and experience in increasing skills in organization, responsibility, problem-solving, decision-making and accountability (Koppang, 2003).
- This evidence based instruction is also documented to include improvements in academic competence (Cushing & Kennedy, 1997; Hunt, Staub, Alwell & Goetz, 1994).
- In addition, pupils at-risk for academic and behavioral issues who enroll in LINKS courses/credit programs and serve as LINK to pupils with ASD also demonstrate increased grades and increased attendance (Cushing and Kennedy, 1997).

2. Definitions:

- a. LINK – a pupil who is enrolled in a LINKS course/credit program and who becomes a peer support or “LINK” to a pupil with ASD
- b. LINKS – a local education agency’s board approved peer-to-peer support course/credit program

3. Who teaches a LINKS course/credit program?

Certified teachers at appropriate grade levels may be teachers assigned to an elective LINKS course/credit program. Depending on the optional model(s) implemented, the teachers may be in special education or general education programs.

4. How is LINKS non-traditional?

Just as algebra content may be embedded into a CTE course/credit program, so may LINKS content be embedded into a general or special education course/credit program. The pupil completing the requirements for the credit, as set forth in the local board of education approved program, earns the credit for LINKS. As an applied/experiential learning credit program, the time assigned to/enrolled in a class as a LINK pupil, with teacher supervision and pupil performance assessment, is bonafide instructional time.

B. Optional Models for implementing LINKS:

1. **Option 1:** *General education elective* taught by special education teacher who is general education certified in the grade level of the elective.

Educational Environment Status: Special Education

- a. A pupil with ASD is enrolled in a special education program.
 - b. A general education LINK pupil is enrolled in a general education *elective* course and is receiving an *elective* course grade.
 - c. The general education LINK pupil attends a special education program with the pupil with ASD and is under the direction of a special education teacher for the class period. The general education LINK pupil reports to the special education LINK teacher for attendance and is graded as a LINK pupil by the LINK special education teacher.
 - d. If there are more than one special education teacher, the LINK special education teacher will grade the LINK pupil in collaboration with the other special education teachers to whom the LINK pupil is assigned for that class period.
 - e. The special education teacher (general education certified for the grade(s) the elective is offered) teaches a general education course called "LINKS," and serves as *the teacher of record*, provides training, facilitates case conferences, and gives the grade for the general education pupil in the elective course. Additional training and or case conferences between the LINK pupil and special education teacher may take place outside of the special education class to which the LINK pupil is assigned.
2. **Option 2:** *General education elective* for pupils with ASD is taught by a LINKS teacher certified in general education in the grade the elective is offered.

Educational Environment Status: General Education Pupil with ASD is enrolled in a general education content course (e.g. pre-algebra) and

- receiving instruction and a grade in the course.
- a. The general education LINK pupil is enrolled in a general education elective course and is receiving an elective course grade.
 - b. The general education LINK pupil reports to the elective LINK teacher for attendance but then attends the general education content course with the pupil with ASD.
 - c. The LINK teacher teaches a general education course called "LINKS," and serves as *the teacher of record*, provides training, facilitates case conferences, and gives the grade for the general education pupils in the elective course. Supervision of the LINK pupil will be ongoing by the LINK teacher and in coordination with the general education teachers to whom the LINK pupil is assigned for that class period.
 - d. Additional training and or case conferences between the LINK pupil and elective teacher may take place outside of the general education class to which the LINK pupil is assigned.
- 3. Option 3:** *General education elective* for pupils with ASD taught by general education teacher who is also teaching a general education content course.
Exception: A general education teacher will instruct, assess and assign grades for two separate inter-related courses at the same time. One is a general education content course in which the pupil with ASD is enrolled and the other is the general education LINKS elective that the general education pupil is taking.
- Educational Environment Status:** General Education Pupil with ASD is enrolled in a general education content course (e.g. pre-algebra) and receiving instruction and a grade in the course.
- a. The general education LINK pupil is enrolled in a general education *elective* course and is receiving an *elective* course grade.
 - b. The general education LINK pupil reports to the general teacher who is both the LINKS teacher and general education teacher for attendance in the general education content course with the pupil with ASD.
 - c. The general education teacher teaches a general education course called "LINKS," and serves as the teacher of record, provides training, facilitates case conferences, and gives the grade for the general education pupil in the elective course. At the same time, the general education teacher is teaching the content course in which the pupil with ASD is enrolled. Additional training and or case conferences between the LINK pupil and general education teacher may take place outside of the general education class to which the LINK pupil is assigned.
- 4. Option 4:** *General education elective* for pupils with ASD taught by special education teacher who is also teaching a special education program.
Exception: Required -- A special education teacher will instruct, assess and assign grades for two separate inter-related courses at the same time. One is the special education program in which the pupil with ASD is enrolled and the

other is the general education LINKS elective that the general education pupil is taking.

Educational Environment Status: Special Education

- a. The pupil with ASD is enrolled in a special education program and receives instruction in that program.
- b. The general education LINK pupil is enrolled in a general education elective course and is receiving elective course grade.
- c. The general education LINK pupil reports to the special education teacher for attendance and attends the special education program with the pupil with ASD.
- d. Special education teacher teaches a general education course called "LINKS," and serves as *the teacher of record*, provides training, facilitates case conferences, and gives the grade for the general education pupil in the elective course which is delivered in the special education class. The special education teacher is teaching the special education program at the same time. Additional training and or case conferences between the LINK pupil and special education teacher may take place outside of the general education class to which the LINK pupil is assigned.

C. General Requirements for all LINKS courses/credit programs for membership eligibility:

- Pupil must be enrolled in grades 6-12,
- Curriculum is approved by the local board of education,
- Instructional objectives are established by the approved peer-to-peer support curricular content,
- Pupil is provided a course syllabus,
- The LINKS teacher must provide lesson plans and the grading criteria for each LINKS course/credit,
- Daily attendance for participating pupils is recorded by the teacher,
- Pupil assessment and grading is completed by the teacher of record,
- Pupil meets all other enrollment and pupil eligibility requirements.

Example 1: LINKS (Peer-to-Peer Support) elective course/credit programs:

LINKS (Peer-to-Peer Support) course/credit program (curriculum-based, board approved). Pupils receive a syllabus, are assessed through formative and summative content and performance measures (such as journals, papers, portfolios, teacher observation, quizzes or tests) and the pupil performance/credit is graded rather than pass or fail.

Example 2: LINKS (Peer-to-Peer Support) course/credit program: The middle school or high school pupil would enroll in a LINKS course/credit program taught by a certified teacher (may be special education or general education). The pupil attends and receives board approved curriculum-based instruction from the certified teacher. The pupil receives a syllabus, is

evaluated through formative and summative assessments (journals, papers, portfolios, teacher observation, quizzes, tests), and the pupil is eligible to receive elective credit (high school pupils receive credit toward a high school diploma) through the issuance of a grade.

D. References:

Q & A ?