

6

Autism Ambassadors at Your School

The Nuts and Bolts of Implementation

So now that you've digested our message, let's talk a little bit about who and what you're going to be looking for, and the concrete steps you will need to take to create an Autism Ambassadors club at your school.

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

Step One: Identify a Student Leader

We all know the kind of person I am talking about here. You have seen him in the movies, or on TV; heck, I have seen him in every single training session I have done, and I have done dozens to date. I am talking about the student who always comes to class prepared, sits either in or near the front row, and always seems to be raising her hand, either because she knows the answer to a question or wishes to ask one of her own. Rather than rolling your eyes at this person (remember: positive, not negative peer pressure), let's see this person for who he is: yes, an influencer, the first person picked out by teachers to help outside of class, but in a broader sense he is the kind of person who wants to stand out in the world. Which is the first quality your student leader needs. A student leader should

- Have a history of the kind of commitment that will translate into finding other students—both typical and those with autism—interested in becoming Ambassadors. A student leader is the kind of person you see holding clipboards in school hallways, or outside supermarkets, trying to get people to sign up for everything from pep rallies to voting.

- Embody a “buck stops here” mentality; rather than complain or chastise a student who did not fulfill an obligation, the student leader simply buckles down and takes care of the obligation herself. Most important, a student leader understands that politics is an admirable career path but a detriment to any organization if it is a prevailing dynamic among its members.

- Understand that leadership doesn’t always mean making one’s voice the loudest but rather making sure that everyone is heard and that the final decision is the right one. A student leader should be the kind of person who understands that power and toughness are often found in the person who says the least but knows how to use his words as economically and wisely as possible.

- Feel a sense of obligation to the cause not only philosophically, but morally. Autism Ambassadors came about because I had a family member with autism; while it helps to know the problem on which you are working firsthand, it is not a prerequisite. What is a prerequisite for a student leader is feeling something inside when she does the right thing. Which doesn’t mean crying every time the ASPCA commercial with Sarah McLachlan comes on, but ideally it should mean that a part of your heart must be invested in this if you are going to be willing to go the extra mile when necessary, with a smile on your face to boot.

And in the absence of any of the above? A student leader should possess an excellent sense of how, and to whom, to delegate authority. Sometimes simply picking the best people is nine-tenths of the battle.

Step Two: Find a Student Committee

Your chosen student leader should appoint the student committee. The student committee’s job is to

- Run the day-to-day program itself. Members of the committee should be the kind of committed, hard-working students who stay after school for study groups and make adults wring their hands about how overprogrammed today’s youth is. (Okay, I’m kidding about that last part—mostly.)

- Spearhead recruiting efforts. While your chosen student leader should oversee recruiting, the truth is that it is every Ambassador’s responsibility to recruit committed students for the cause. Remember, depending on your school’s size and demographic makeup, there are hundreds of underserved peers out there, and hundreds more people who are able to—and want to—help but don’t know where to start. Like many things, finding the right people is a numbers game; it’s no different from selling products door-to-door.

- Plan and follow through on all outside efforts, including fundraising and communication. This will include everything from checking in regularly with the faculty advisor to coordinating the club's efforts with the administration to ensure that there are no problems should the club wish to hold an event on school grounds. The student committee should also be the liaison to any parent groups who might be interested in helping the club with anything from community outreach to fundraising efforts.

Step Three: Set Up an Autism Ambassadors Training!

As much as it might feel like you are processing a lot of information right now, this process isn't nearly as overwhelming as it sounds. We will happily provide an experienced Ambassador, free of charge (Autism Ambassadors is a free service; there are no dues or other costs of any kind) to help train your new students. Once they are trained, we will continue to provide guidance on how to run your club based on the peer leadership model outlined in this book.

Because we like to keep our curriculum and program as up to date as possible, once every six months we will use our proprietary evaluation tool (a copy of which can be found at the end of this book) to make sure that your Ambassadors are adhering to our curriculum and vice versa; we want our curriculum to work optimally for your club as well and welcome any feedback or suggestions you might have to improve it.

FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATION INVOLVEMENT

Every school has its own set of rules and protocol by which students and the community must abide. Autism Ambassadors feels strongly about its role as a stress-reliever, not stress-inducer, and to that end we insist that every club act in strict accordance with any and all guidelines set forth by your school's administration. While nothing inherent to Autism Ambassadors has ever created, nor should it ever create, conflict at any school of which we are a part, here are a few steps that will ensure that your club remains a member in good standing of your school community.

Step One: Get a Faculty Advisor

Most clubs require one, but just in case your school is that one exception that doesn't, we strongly urge you to have faculty oversight. As you will notice when you read our lesson plans, at times there is a behavioral factor in the training that is best addressed when a faculty member is, if not present, at least aware of the training. Autism Ambassadors is very much an educational club, which is different from being a movie lovers club; as such, it is a club for which faculty involvement has the potential to be emphasized more than it might be in other clubs. Try to recruit a faculty member who strikes you as being a slightly older version of what you look for in an Ambassador: positive and community conscious. Based on my own experience, you can usually tell if a faculty person is community conscious because he will typically be involved in student activities

in his spare time. Make sure he is kept in the loop on all of the group's progress; weekly meetings are ideal, but whoever is in charge of communications should be sending out regular e-mails as well. Your faculty advisor will not only ensure that you are following all the rules but can also be a valuable resource and liaison between you and the parents (whose involvement we will soon discuss).

Step Two: Keep the Principal, or Vice Principal, Updated

Many students feel that the principal is too busy for them, or they have such a negative association with what it means to be in her office that they would rather keep what they're doing under the radar. If those are your feelings, I strongly urge you to buck them. Your principal, or if your school is too large for any real input from her, your vice principal, can be not only your biggest fan but can also be your greatest advocate in the community. (Remember, you are essentially offering her unpaid labor—by individuals who are happy to be unpaid—that will free up her other resources.) My principal, Ron Lipari, has been an advocate of Autism Ambassadors from day one and has provided me with advice and help on everything from the bureaucracy of education to handling media requests. So learn to view the administration as your friend, and make sure you keep an apple nice and shiny for those trips to the principal's office!

Step Three: Get the Parents Involved

What your student committee is to your club, your parents—and the parents not only of other Ambassadors but of students with autism—can be for your community. Think about all those Girl Scout and soccer moms and dads and how passionate they are: up early in the morning in foul weather, either to help sell boxes of cookies or help register kids for leagues. Now think about how that same work force can help your cause. While Autism Ambassadors is free, like every organization, it benefits from money and awareness. The more money that is brought in, the more the club has the freedom to actually hire extra faculty for additional hands-on help, rather than simply relying on volunteers. The more awareness that is spread through flyers, phone calls, and e-mails, the more your club can direct its resources—you—toward the people who need it most. Finding parents who wish to get involved can be a bit of a challenge; just like us, many of them are overprogrammed these days and have more commitments than they can handle. That said, parents of students with autism are typically so grateful for Autism Ambassadors that they find the time to get involved. Make them your first calls when you start signing up students with autism, and make sure your communications head maintains an updated phone number and e-mail address list at all times.