What services does Sacramento START provide to the community?

Students Today Achieving Results for Tomorrow (START) is fully funded through a state grant called ACES (Afterschool Education and Safety) and we provide afterschool programs in 63 elementary schools in four districts in the greater Sacramento area. All our programs are located in elementary schools in lower economic areas where at least 50% of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunches. There are high rates of juvenile crime in the areas we serve, so one of the programs functions is to keep kids off the street between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. We do homework assistance and tutoring, enrichment activities and recreation. There is a 20-1 student to staff ratio. We also have 58 AmeriCorps members, who are placed in teams of 2, and who implement the Get Fit Now program.

You envisioned the tile project as a way to build community between different groups of people and between community members and the schools. Is this accurate?

It's two-fold, as far as community, we strive to create partnerships between the communities and schools where we are located, such as bringing in businesses and individual volunteers to assist. Last year, we had close to 500 volunteers in our programs, some are long-term and stay for the entire school year and some come in just to do special projects. We were looking to expand that and include people with disabilities in our volunteer opportunities. We hadn't specifically targeted them before, but we wanted to, particularly because any child that attends our schools is eligible for our programs and we didn’t have a lot of children from special education enrolling. We thought that bringing in volunteers with disabilities would educate our program staff and give more opportunities to the students.

Also, we wanted to build relationships with children and families enrolled in the special

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education classrooms. Disability inclusion has been a bit of a barrier for our staff in terms of feelings of uncertainty and sailing into uncharted waters. And, we wanted to let students in special education and their families know that we are here and that we provide services to everyone. I think many families didn’t realize that the program was open to their children or that we have the ability to make the appropriate accommodations.

We have been working towards this for a while. Last July, Kids Included Together (KIT) provided an inclusion training for all of our site directors and their second in charge. We invited staff from other Parks and Recreation Departments that were offering children’s programming. KIT also trained our supervisors as trainers so they could provide additional support to sites.

**What was the process for creating and completing the murals?**

I fired and glazed the tiles. Each school mural had one tile with the school name, one with the START logo and one with the name of the special education teacher. Beyond that each participating student was given a tile and they could paint whatever they wanted. We gave them special art pencils to write their name. We had a variety of paints, brushes and stamps for them to use if they wanted.

We suggested that each school have an assembly to show off the murals. Three schools did. The principal presented the murals and recognized the START students and special education students. Then they were mounted in the schools.

**Family participation was a big part of these events. How did families react to the project?**

Their interaction was amazing, they were very engaged. We did games, UNO and Jenga, at the beginning of each event and they played along. The events gave parents an opportunity to talk with the START staff at their particular school, and in a different kind of environment, one that wasn’t so harried. We offered dinner at every event. Parents, kids and staff all sat and ate together. We had everyone wear name tags and sit wherever they wanted so there was a lot of intermingling between START families and families from special education. It was a good opportunity to socialize.

We discouraged parents from doing tiles themselves, particularly because we didn’t want the kids to feel overshadowed. But that gave parents more of an opportunity to talk to their kids while they were painting. As a society we all have such fast paced schedules now, so it was nice to see parents talking to their kids in a relaxed, engaged way.
You recruited students with disabilities and their families to help create the murals. And you recruited other volunteers, some with disabilities, to organize and assist at the events. What were the most effective recruitment methods?

All the ways we used were effective. Having face to face meetings with special education teachers was great and helped motivate them to get their families to come. I talked to them about the tile project and what it was all about and during those conversations I also talked about our program and about that fact that it was accessible to their students, as well. As a result of these conversations, teachers did more than hand out our event fliers; they made phone calls to personally invite families and encourage them to attend.

We also did face to face conversations to recruit volunteers with disabilities. We approached the Short Center South, a fine arts program that supports artists with developmental disabilities and the Access Teen Leisure program, which provides recreational opportunities for teens with disabilities. By meeting face to face it gave them the opportunity to ask more questions if they chose to. We did a lot of recruiting online as well, and got a lot of responses. People always want to volunteer when you do something with kids and the description we created was a good motivator.

START utilizes AmeriCorps members. What role did the AmeriCorps members play and how did this experience affect them?

With the first event I had everything pre-planned for them, but with the next events we provided more and more opportunities for members to take the lead. After the first event we put a different member in charge each time. They did the orientations, assigned volunteers to different jobs, and made sure everyone was doing what they were supposed to be doing. Even if they weren’t assigned to do overall facilitation, they had other leadership roles, for instance they organized the dinner. They decided how the line would flow and who should be doing what. It’s a priority to give our members leadership experiences and this event did that.

Also, disability was new to most of them. There was a lot of anxiety prior to the first event, they weren’t sure what to expect or what was expected of them. They had questions like, “will I need to push a kid in wheelchair?” or “will I have to help students with disabilities get food or eat their food?”
It was just the newness. We had the same AmeriCorps members at each event. After the first event they were a lot more comfortable and relaxed around people with disabilities.

How do you think this project strengthened your program overall?

Overall, it’s strengthened the staff and AmeriCorps members, given them more confidence in their skills and in their abilities to work with students with disabilities. It’s opened doors for us with the families involved with special education. Now they know that START is just as much for their kids as it is for kids from other classrooms.

And I imagine the students feel good when they walk by their mural and they can point to their tile and tell their friends. It’s always good to see your stuff on display and those murals should be there for a long time. Teachers from classrooms also came to the event and it gave them an opportunity to see what we do. We have deepened relationships with two community disability groups, the Short Center and Access Teen Leisure, and they are now aware of our existence. Our volunteer coordinator will contact those agencies during the next school year. We hope to have volunteers from the Short Center come out and do very specific art lessons with students.

What advice would you give other program wanting to organize similar events?

Make sure you talk to everybody, not just your own staff. It’s important to get the buy in of school principals. If you want the murals hung up, they’re the ones who are going to need to okay it. You need buy in from the classroom teachers; they’re the ones with relationships with the families and students. You need to make sure that everyone has a connection to the bigger picture and will play some role in the event.

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