



Building Connection and Community in Middle and High School Settings

A presentation by Kara Hume, PhD and Victoria Waters, MEd on May 2, 2024.

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So since most of you are here now, let's get started. So those of you who just joined us. Good afternoon and welcome to today's webinar, Building Connection and Community in Middle and High School Settings. My name is Kat and I'm your host for today's event. It's great to have you all today. I have the distinct pleasure of introducing today's speakers, Kara Hume and Victoria Waters.

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Kara Hume is an Associate Professor at the School of Education at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, for almost 35 years. Hume has worked with and learned from autistic children and young adults in various capacities for research, focuses on increased access for individuals with developmental disabilities to high quality, community based support. Victoria Waters is an educational consultant at UNC, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, and has over ten years of experience in autism and developmental disabilities.

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Among her other roles, she coordinates autism projects and develops evidence based practice modules and resources for autistic learners. Okay, without further ado, take it away.

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Welcome, everyone, and thank you so much for that warm introduction. We're so happy to have you here and appreciate you spending an hour of your day with us. I've been happy to talk about something that's really important to both Victoria and I about how we can build connections and communities in our middle school and high school settings.

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I just start a course with some acknowledgments to so many colleagues here at UNC and well beyond who have helped to develop some of these materials and resources, obviously to a number of autistic individuals, students that we've collaborated with, service providers, caregivers, family members who have contributed to the work, and our funders for much of this work, coming from the Department of Education, the Office of Special Education Program, and other donors who have supported us.

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So I want to start with acknowledging them. To give you a little grounding or orientation to what we'll be talking about today, we're going to talk about how to support community connections, really thinking about what kinds of changes can we make out of structural level or at a cultural level in the school. And even we can think beyond in community settings.

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We'll talk about three ways to start that process, thinking about how can we build more neurodiversity affirming spaces or schools within the community settings as well. We'll touch on that. Obviously, we could spend an whole hour on just that. Talking about how we can find champions at the school to support this work and help to move this work forward.

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And then we'll talk about a very specific evidence based practice, peer mediated interventions, and how we might use that in middle and high school settings to build more of a community feel and build that connectedness. We'll share with you some resources with QR code and visuals to help you get a sense of how to access more information about these topics

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after we talk. Also, as Kat mentioned, we have a number of handouts that will guide you to those resources as well. And we'll end our time today with time for questions and discussion. And some of you sent some questions ahead of time that we'll target and others of you are welcome to add questions to that question pane as we go along today.

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A note about language that will be used in this webinar. In recent years, this debate on language patterns has gained traction within the autistic community and beyond. Some individuals advocate for identity first language, preferring terms like autistic person empathizing autism as an inherent aspect of their identity. And there are those that advocate

for person first, language like person with autism, aiming to put the emphasis on the person rather than the condition.

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Reasons behind these preferences vary widely. Advocates of identity first language focus on their deep involvement within that autistic community, embracing their uniqueness and rejecting medical model that conveys autism as something that can be fixed. Advocates of person first language may focus their...on their individuality, navigating multiple intersecting identities, or have or are currently experiencing autism as a stigma or as a negative like label.

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We recognize the evolving nature of language and the diverse perspectives and experiences of people. Therefore, in this webinar, we aim to use on the spectrum as our preferred terminology. As this is accepted by both identity first and person first language users or autism person as this is the preference by most of the autism community.

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Thanks Victoria. So did you know we're going to start talking about school connectedness that about half of all high school students...so outside of, having autism or our other identities, half of our high school students report feeling disconnected from their school. And the CDC has done some work around school connectedness and defined school connectedness as this idea of when students feel that both adults and peers in school care about their learning, as well as them as individuals.

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So this is the idea of being cared for, being supported, and having a sense of belonging, which is truly what we are hoping for for our students. There are higher rates of disconnectedness for students with disabilities, so students on the spectrum perceive and that they are more bullied and that they are less liked, that they are less involved in really the interaction of what's happening in the school, less understood by teachers and peers, and more insecure in their school environment when compared to peers, that are not on the autism spectrum.

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It's important to know about school connectedness. So why do we care? Of course we care. Given what, autistic students are identifying on that previous slide. But that sense of school connectedness is actually a protective factor for many things for mental and emotional well-being. It's linked to positive affect, higher self-esteem, and actually higher life satisfaction. This is really important for students on the autism spectrum, given that they tend to have higher rates of reported loneliness, higher rates of depression, higher rates of suicidality.

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So we can think about school connectedness as a potential protective factor for some of those things. And you can see why it's a really important construct to consider and an area to think about programming around. Beyond kind of what's happening in school, we see across populations that school connectedness can have protective effect on other health outcomes that we really don't even are thinking about necessarily when we're in school settings and things related to violence, sexual behavior, and substance use.

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We also note that students that have a stronger feeling of school connectedness are more likely to earn higher grades. And I think, grades are a very small part of what I think to be an important piece of a school career. But that's often what it takes to get administrators and sometimes teachers engaged in this conversation around school connectedness.

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The literature also shows up higher test scores, better school attendance, and more likely to stay in school longer. So school connectedness is particularly important for any young person who is at an increased risk of feeling alienated or feeling isolated, and then that often includes students with disabilities. So thinking about how we can support school personnel, how we can support peers to build a more inclusive environment, and how we can develop strategies, extracurriculars, curricula that really reflects the reality of a diverse student body is critical to help with school connectedness.

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So why is connectedness difficult and especially difficult in middle and high school? Well, as many of you who are in school settings or have experience middle or high school yourself know that that environment gets much more complex. So we have changing classes and bigger classes. So personnel are seeing maybe 150 students a day versus maybe what they saw in elementary school with a class of 20 to 30.

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So that means that teachers don't know students as well, so they have less opportunity to build that connected relationship or community. And that students don't know each other as well. So they're rotating through classes with, you know, 150 students so they have less of an opportunity to build those relationships. Also, students are coming from various settings. So often in an elementary school, you might go through your classes with the same students.

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So you get to know students nuances and their perks and their special interests and their personalities. But here you have students feeding in from many other settings. There's less opportunity to build those connections. The second piece to acknowledge is that social dynamics become much more complex in middle and high school. So peers become a dominant influence rather than adults, which we might see in elementary school.

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So adults might be pulling back out of some of the relational issues that happen in middle and high school. And peers are often left to navigate and work through situations on their own. We know, I know, I have two teenagers that peer interactions can be nuanced. So what can you say and when can you say it?

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And what is sarcasm and what is innuendo and what, you know, language am I pulling from certain trends or TikToks? So there's just more complexity in those interactions. There also tends to be more assumptions about the social skills that students have. So, for example, if a teacher is putting students into a group experience, they may have a sense, "Oh, you've worked in groups before. You already know how to navigate the social dynamics of this group.

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You know what your role is. You know how to complete this.” So there's less explicit instruction around some of the group or collaborative pieces which then can lend itself potentially to complexities around building these relationships.

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Again, so I was diagnosed on the spectrum during my school years back in 1990. However, in the 1990s, our understanding of autism was limited, primarily viewed through a medical lens that often overlooked the unique experience of individuals, especially females like myself. Autism, then, was just shrouded in misconceptions and stigma, with mainstream portrayals reinforcing stereotypes and isolating those on the spectrum. Due to the stigma of being labeled and the lack of knowledge about autism,

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my mother rejected my school diagnosis and didn't share with me at the time. Throughout my primary school years, I had experienced a deep sense of disconnection and feeling different from others. I knew I was different, but I did not understand or know why. This sense of wanting to connect shaped much of my school experience. I could see my peers interacting with each other easily and form friendships, but I could not figure out how to do it myself.

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It wasn't until I was an undergraduate, taking a psychology course in 2003 that I became aware of my school diagnosis. I remember reading about autism thinking that as me. I shared my thoughts with my mom and she revealed my school diagnosis. I finally understood why I felt different, why I had struggled so much with making friends and understanding people.

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The 2000's marked a turning point in autism awareness, with increased recognition and support for individuals on the spectrum. This was when I went on to get an official diagnosis. Reflecting on my journey, I can't help but wonder how different my school experience might have been with a better understanding of autism, a consistent foundation of friendships and champions, as well as supports and strategies.

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It was Judy Singer and Australian sociologist who created the term neurodiversity in her thesis in 1998, she stated that, “Neurological differences are not deficits, but natural variations of human diversity that should be accepted and respected instead of being fixed.” Neurodiversity is more than just autism. Dyslexia, ADHD, OCD, and many more can also be considered neurodiverse ways of thinking and are invaluable for societal progress.

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The maintenance of neurodiversity are emphasizing individual strengths to meet self-identified needs, while building self-esteem and self determination instead of conforming to what is neurotypical or normal behavior.

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Thanks Victoria. So we are, Victoria and I, pitching and the field I think is moving in this direction to start considering how our school spaces can be more neurodiversity affirming. And why are we pitching this? Well, historically, I’m a special educator by training. Historically, we've in special ed work to adjust the behavior of an individual with a disability to fit in more with the school culture or the community climate.

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Rather than recognizing what are some of the system structures, other things that need to change, how can we better prepare the broader community to be more supportive and inclusive of their future autistic colleagues, their autistic classmates, their, other students, teachers, employees, friends, partners, attendees, visitors? So wherever individuals are going to be this day, there will be people in that space.

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So how can we think about shifting this perspective of what may need to change, not just, the individual skills, but this barriers to connection. The barriers to community building go well beyond an individual's skills and much more built into how we're thinking about systems and structures. So we're thinking about neurodiversity, affirming schools to first help build positive identity development for people who identify that way, but also to build this collective identity that we are a space that is affirming of diversity.

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And here particularly thinking about neurodiversity. So what we'll share today are kind of very small baby steps on a bigger mission of helping to build more neurodiversity inclusive spaces, knowing that that is one way, that we can build this connection and community, that people feel more a sense of belonging if their identity is affirmed.

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So one example we'll talk about is, this is big for anyone with special ed, is how to conceptualize an IEP. So this example I pulled from the speech and hearing literature. And this really in the article that I referenced here, talking about students who stutter, and so we can think about that. There could be some parallels there to think about, an individual with autism in a historically in a stuttering literature, or in IEPs that are linked to stuttering.

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From what I understand from my colleagues, they often used to have primarily goals that focused on normalizing speech. So all the goals around what can we do to essentially eliminate this stutter? And we can think in parallels around autism, right, about social communication skills or, the nuanced is around social behavior that many goals, written for our students on the spectrum are about social behavior that we want to align with certain behavioral norms and what we've determined to be more normalized.

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And so I really love this idea of starting some shifts and how we're goal writing and how we're conceptualizing to have even our IEP is reflect this neurodiversity affirming. So in this example

about stuttering some of these IEP goals that they were proposing to make this shift were about first helping the student know more about their speech production and stuttering.

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What is it? How does it impact me? What's unique about it? Learning more about and for this case about speech tension and location of tension. And for us to think about in the autism world, wouldn't this be a great opportunity to build goals around what is neurodiversity? How do I understand the world around me? What are my strengths in learning and having goals around that?

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And I know sometimes people are wondering should I share a child's information with them? So you know that they're learning about autism? I think from Victoria's perspective, it would have been helpful to have the opportunity to learn more about autism and how it impacted her learning. And so that's one way to think about how can we embed that and build that into our IEPs.

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Another example that this article provides again is giving examples for stuttering. We can speak about link or application in autism. So educating others about stuttering in a self chosen format. So helping the classmates, helping others in the school community to better understand what is stuttering? Why does that happen? What makes it better? What makes it worse?

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What is my experience been like with this stutter? And certainly we draw the parallel there with autism. How can we better help our broader community understand autism? What are the strengths of autistic students? What are...what might be more difficult for students on the spectrum in the class and how could that information be shared? And the next goal that's there is talking about supporting self-advocacy.

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So what are ways that the student can learn some self-advocacy skills? And here specifically talking about teasing, and it does indicate with support from others, but how then could a student to on the spectrum work around self advocating? So helping to bring to attention things that are happening in a school setting are asking for accommodations that they need.

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So these are just some examples of ways we could, again, adjust these goals to be more, neurodiversity affirming. And certainly we'll talk about this, that the burden of, educating people about autism certainly doesn't need to fall only to the student with autism. And they may or may not choose to disclose that information to others. So we'll share with you as we go some ways that that information can be shared without the burden being on the student.

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Then the last part of the IEP is then we're building in these support strategies, for us to be support strategies around connecting to a larger community. But here's where we think about what are some of the goals that this student might have? So for this student, working with the stutter, exploring speaking strategies that decrease avoidance and increase the ease of communication.

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Right? So for us, the parallel would be what are some strategies that can ease this connection and community building? So maybe that's helping students to find clubs on campus. Maybe it's attending a club with the student on campus. Maybe it is. We'll talk about building some peer networks and peer support. So what are the support strategies that are going to help to build connection and build community?

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And then of course, you can see on there that there are, you know, accommodations of other things. So again, this is just an idea to put out there that we can think about our IEPs as a vehicle to start building this more affirming school community. Another idea, as I mentioned, is sharing more about autism and neurodiversity with the larger community.

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And this is a way to build community. And like I said, it doesn't need to. It doesn't require disclosure. So this can be happening in your community well beyond, a specific student on the spectrum. So I'll share a few resources that our team has made and that our has created. But there are many resources out there.

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So as part of a high school project, we developed a series called 'Peer to Peer.' And this is written by students on the spectrum. This particular Peer to Peer that's called "Building Inclusive Classroom with your Neurodivergent Peers" was written by a college student on the spectrum and a student who does not identify on the spectrum working together to talk about their experiences in classes together.

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And so that's a free resource that's available on one of the websites that Victoria will share at the end. So, there are others similar to that. The other resource that you might be familiar with this if you're familiar with, OAR's work is the Kits for Kids. And there's some nice studies done on this autism awareness and the impact that it can have on school and classroom settings.

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But the Kits for Kids, it's being publicized nicely now by OAR, has been around for a while and has a great YouTube site. It has hard copy materials, things that you can print. It's really just teaching about what autism is. It does have a middle school vibe. Elementary school might be too young for high school, but there are other resources out there for high school and again are just sharing

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what is the diversity of the human experience? And how can we better understand each other as a vehicle to build this connection and community? One more strategy I want to talk about linking to neurodiversity affirming spaces is affinity groups and these work really well in middle school and high school settings. So affinity groups have been around for some time.

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They are groups that bring people together to have something important in common. So it could be related to race. It can be related to gender. It could be related to sexual orientation. It could certainly be related to profession. It's certainly related to special interest. So there are lots of affinity groups that exist on high school campuses and we're suggesting potentially an additional affinity group that's really related to neurodiversity.

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So this is from a high school. This is from the student newspaper, promoting their new neurodiversity club at their high school and understanding how they learn. So thinking about is there an affinity group in your space, in your middle school or high school that we could think about? And like I said, it doesn't have to be only about neurodiversity.

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It could be related to special interests or other interests or other identities that your students on the spectrum have. There's some examples. It's building clubs around special interest. And that can be then serve as a way like an affinity club. So this is one of a high school that has a video game club, an anime club.

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And I want to share with you an article. This is an older article, but the message I think is still very relevant. So this author. He's a professor, but a former high school English teacher, and shares in this article how when he was in high school, the impact of the Star Trek club and what that meant to him.

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He was very interested in Star Trek and sometimes I would say he noted in the article that students that were very engaged in Star Trek might have been on the fringes of some of that community at the school. He identified or self-identified. And that was geek, geek like, to be interested in Star Trek. But how this Star Trek club on campus really served as a place of refuge for him.

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And so in his work as a high school teacher always sought out to create these spaces and built an affinity club and his high school called it the Sci Fi Club that covered lots of topics. And what he really noted was the higher the visibility of that club. So this club became well known on campus for students, took a trip to Japan each year, made announcements about activities and events, and as the club's visibility grew, the interest group and the acceptance grew.

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The engagement grew for students who maybe you might not have thought would be interested in a Sci Fi club. But that that can actually serve again as a protective factor around bullying and build a sense of connection and community at the school. So yeah. So those are just three things just to be thinking about, about neurodiversity affirming practices and strategies.

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And so our first question will be open ended. So feel free to submit your answers via your Q&A function. The question is: What are some neurodiversity affirming practices or spaces in your setting? When you're done responding, click Submit.

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And as answers come in, I'll share a few. So lunch bunch groups. Absolutely. So we'll talk about that actually specifically around peer networks and unified sport. Yes. I think exercise is a great vehicle to build connections and communities. That's one of my special interests now for sure.

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And I'm scrolling through. Oh, it looks like that might be our our only response today if I'm reading it correctly. But we appreciate that. As you're thinking about it. Yeah. If you want to add more into there, that's great. I think just more questions are coming in. Okay. And yes, hopefully as we talk, you'll hear more and Victoria

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will share some of hers so we can give examples too. While I navigated high school, sensory overload was a constant challenge for me, especially during school arrival and lunchtime. Although I wasn't aware of being on the spectrum, my senses were overwhelmed, my ears were buzzing, my thinking was foggy, my body was tense, anxious, and itchy.

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All my peers seemed to be at ease chatting away during school arrival lunchtime, these times were really loud and chaotic for me. So instead, I found ways to cope. Instead of the loud cafeteria or the open areas, I sought solace in the library. As an avid and fast reader, I could quiet my mind and body in the world of Nancy Drew, The Hardy Boys, Sweet Valley High, and books by Christopher Pike. The library became my safe space.

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I could also go to the art classroom during school arrival to spend time drawing, painting, or working on projects. It was a space where I could find peace amongst the chaos.

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Thanks Victoria. So finding the right class, sometimes the right teacher, what she'll talk about to you. And great, a number of you have put in some other ideas. Thank you. So extra time for passing between periods. I love that some students get released 1 or 2 minutes early, or stay back 1 or 2 minutes after so they can miss some of that sensory experience that you described

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Victoria. Also, scheduling playdates, social night at school, parent events, anything to welcome people in and bring them into the school space. Also, there's a side thread happening on around exercise. So...having support runners at the Boston Marathon. So I'm going to follow up on that. All right. And this is linked. So it's thinking about who are the people who we call the champions of connection?

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Who are the people in the school have buildings in the local community that can help the port move? Who can help move this movement forward? What I said, as a special educator, that this idea of building a broader, affirming community and connection cannot be only a special education initiative. So we have to move beyond the specialized staff, who often have big case loads and lots of meetings and don't always know all of the students in the school may have connections with a smaller number of students.

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So thinking more broadly, who else can we bring into this mission? And there's a few avenues that we've taken in the high schools where we've worked. The first is finding staff that are interested in school connectedness, often by design. So lots of places where we start are school counselors, school social workers. Anyone that just has this school, sometimes the school nurse or wellness facilitator. Sometimes there's an assistant principal, especially that has a special ed lens that has this interest in a broader school connectedness.

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So starting to reach out to other people that are just interested in overall wellness, health, well-being. As you can see that school connectedness is a protective factor for all students as it comes...as it relates to health issues. So the other avenue that we have gone that help champion this connection is finding staff that have a personal investment.

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So in one of our high schools, the media center director had a daughter on the spectrum. And at that high school was really committed to thinking about how could she use a media center as a space, as Victoria described that all students felt welcome. And that media center essentially became the hub for our lunch groups and our peer networks.

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But this teacher was engaged because of her personal connection. And now so many of us have a personal connection. There's so many staff at our school buildings that have a child on the spectrum. Or a niece or nephew, a neighbor, a friend who are now have this personal investment to build connection. We often look for staff with high social capital.

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So when we are pitching the idea of peer networks, we actually first reached out to PE teachers and coaches. So in the middle school and high school, those teachers seemed to be kind of at the highest social capital that students tend to relate with often and sometimes have a nice kind of sway influence on the campus.

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And so it seemed like when we got buy in from those teachers, and we were more likely to be able to spread the word about some of these initiatives. Club facilitators are another amazing way to reach out. So I just shared this idea of affinity clubs, but thinking about who are the

people that are leading clubs already that our students on the spectrum are gravitating towards?

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And can we reach out to them to do some more kind of purposeful, thoughtful ways to build connections within those clubs? The other way is to find teachers that have aligned special interests. Students. You can really find this in high school because there are teachers with so many expertise, but certainly in middle school as well.

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So if you have students that are really interested in anime, then reaching out to your career and technical education teachers who are doing graphic design and your student may or may not be taking that class, but your student can start building a personal relationship with someone that has a similar interest. That could be anything from automotive teacher if you have that at your school. Students that are interested in music maybe. The theater or the choir teacher.

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So thinking about even if I'm not in that class, how can I start connecting these students with teachers who have different...or I mean, who have similar interests in those and varied expertise. So going beyond special ed and then thinking about at the schools, who are the students that you could engage in these ideas around affirming spaces and connected spaces?

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So maybe there is a school club that wants to take on this idea of sharing about autism more broadly. Hopefully informed by students on the spectrum as well. But if they're not interested in disclosing or sharing that broadly, maybe there's a club. So is there a club on campus that's already committed to leadership or connection or belonging or someone that's a club...that's service oriented?

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Are there students that are already connected or plugged in? So students who are part of Project Unify. So that sports or part of a lunch group can use them to help build this connectedness beyond. The activity that they're already engaged in. And similarly, what we do for staff, we look for students who are well connected on the campus to help bring in students who are feeling less connected.

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So in a number of our high schools, that was students that were involved in theater. They just tended to be students who were well connected across campus and tended to be really open and inclusive. Often student athletes were the same that they were interested in being engaged in this way and helping to build a more inclusive community in schools.

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And maybe...Victoria. Maybe you want to share yours. We'll put this question out and then you share yours. That might spur people's ideas. So go ahead and then...Yeah. If you want to share the question. Okay. Our second question is also open ended. So feel free to submit the answers in the questions pane. The question is: Who are the champions in your setting?

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When you're done responding, click Submit. Okay. And then I'll go to your slide Victoria while they're answering and then we'll come back. Okay. And my high school years, amidst the challenges and navigating sensory overload, feeling different and disconnected, I was fortunate to find champions among the school staff. They may not have fully understood my struggles or why I was different, but they recognized my need for support and stepped up in remarkable ways.

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One such champion was the librarian who saw my need for sanctuary and wrote me a permanent hall pass. Allowed me to escape to the library during school arrival and lunchtime

without fear of reprimand. Another was my art teacher who noticing my difficulty in making friends rearrange the classroom and introduce flexible seating arrangements to foster a more inclusive environment.

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And then there was the school principal who went above and beyond by establishing a principals club for students like me, providing invaluable leadership opportunities for our college applications. Reflecting on my high school journey, I'm grateful for these champions who supported me and created spaces where I felt seen and valued. Their support made a tangible difference in my high school experience, shaping my sense of belonging and contributing to my growth and development.

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And so I wonder what deeper impact could they have had then if they had more formalized tools for supporting students like me that we have today? Thanks Victoria. And as you're talking, you're inspiring others. So, people noted speech therapist, social worker, a number of specific teachers, interns. I love this. People that are often overlooked can be the greatest champions.

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How we think about janitors, school secretaries. So the administrators that people are interacting with every day. Cafeteria staff. A student because I have a school and they had a kindness club. So students in that club being champions. Siblings can be champions. Yes. If they're at the school can serve as champion school aides. Just kind of going through...I think we touched on almost all of them.

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So thank you guys for sharing your experiences too. All right. So we're thinking about neurodiversity affirming schools. We're thinking about finding champions to help move that work forward. And now we'll talk more specifically about an evidence based practice that we might use in school settings to help foster connections with community. So this is peer

mediated interventions. And that's essentially engaging classmates and peers to provide mutual support in the classroom and purposely build connections across the school.

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And I just want to note that we want to think about peer mediated interventions in this way. Often in peer mediated interventions, it's been a student without autism kind of serving as a role model or a tutor to help adjust the skills or behavior of the students on the spectrum. And we want to move away from that dynamic.

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So it's not a hierarchical dynamic. We want to think about having mutual connection sharing strengths for all that everyone's bringing something to this connection. That there are benefits for all. So we're not just trying to center what we would say is neurotypical play or social interaction, but communication and pathologizing autistic related behavior. And we're not putting any burden of change only on the autistic students.

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So you know, I need you, a student on the spectrum, to look more like the student that's not on the spectrum. That's not what we're advocating in these relationships. We're thinking about relationships that are mutually supportive that are amplifying a number of students' strengths, but are really intended to build connections in classroom settings and out of classroom settings.

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PMI offers many benefits within middle and high school settings. PMI cultivates understanding and acceptance among all students, reducing bullying and reducing feelings of anxiety and isolation for all involved. By enhancing social emotional well-being, PMI contributes to improved academic outcomes and aids in the formation of their identity. Its effectiveness spans across various age groups, positively impacting social interactions and overall engagement.

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Whether it's social or academic, it can be used across different settings within a school. PMI ensures the availability and consistency of peers, thereby maximizing its positive effects for all students, highlighting its diverse benefits, enriching experiences for both students on the spectrum and their peers.

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And we'll touch on, really two types of peer mediated intervention today. And we'll really just like, whet your appetite for more. There's much more about how to implement these specifically in the resources that Victoria will share. Just we'll talk briefly about peer supports and peer networks. So keep in mind we think about peer supports is happening in the classroom.

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That could be in academic class. A CTE class. A specialist class. And really building a network of 2 to 3 students per class. And one of those students will be a student on the spectrum. The other students may or may not. It just might depend on who's the best match for those students. And the goals tend to be around, class engagement, collaboration, or could be goals for the whole group to build their academic skills.

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And really this goal around connectedness. So that's happening in the class. Peer networks, we think of as happening outside of your academic classes. So things like lunch groups or happening within a club. So in the Sci Fi club, we're building this peer network. Usually there's about 3 to 6 students in the network. And again the goal is around engagement.

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So engagement with each other, engagement with the school community connectedness and really fun. Not to say that you can't have fun with your peer supports, but peer networks doesn't have an academic focus typically.

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So for peer supports and this is similar across, it's really thinking about why as the teacher or the service provider, I see an adult and with the group of students think about why would we want to put a peer support in place. In this class, who might want to be involved then mapping out a plan, a way that, students can support each other, helping students know what their role is to support each other, implementing in the classroom and then ongoing facilitation by staff, which really is just checking in with the students as they go.

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So often for a group and this is an example of a small group at invitation. This is in a number of our materials and this comes from the propel project. So here's a script I'm putting together student groups to help all students feel more part of the class. Maybe this would include things like sitting next to each other, helping each other know what's important in class.

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Just chatting during free times. Interacting with students at school is one of the best parts of school. For some, it'd be great for students to get to know each other. Would you be interested in being part of one of these groups? Okay, so that is a way that we offer to teachers to help invite people identify what some of the goals might be.

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And this I will note for peer support does not require disclosure of autism. Some students are disclosing that. Some are not. But that's definitely not a requirement. We offer in a peer support plan ways that students can support each other. And again, this is for everyone involved. So asking each other what you did over the weekend, figuring out how to work together in a group, how could you include someone to work together more?

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What are some questions you could ask? And then always letting them know, if you're not sure how to bring each other together, you can always reach out to your teacher who's the facilitator. And these are some of the goals that groups have come up with. So increasing student interaction, student involvement, encouraging students to look to each other for support rather than always looking to the one teacher. You know, there's 30 kids in the class that could help out, and providing a chance to get to know each other and interact on a regular basis.

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So that's kind of a quick and dirty on peer supports. For peer network, very similar thinking about what the goals of the group might be, figuring out who might be in the group if it's not a club that's already established, orienting students to that group meeting, we say for peer networks like weekly is important. Peer support tends to happen daily in an academic class.

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And then for peer networks, encouraging connections outside of those meetings. So in some of our resources, on the CSESA website that Victoria will share, we have a way to orient peers to what a peer network is, how to get involved, and what are the benefits. So things that are already made for you to share. For peer networks,

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so it could be in the context of an already existing club where then you're bringing people together more purposefully in the club to build connections. So if the club has 60 kids, that might be too much to navigate. You might then narrow in 5 or 6 kids that could be part of the network within the club. Certainly peer networks could have happened in sports.

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That's happened in a number of high schools we worked in. That could happen in a micro enterprise. So a lot of school campuses have a coffee shop, a school store. That's a cool way to build a network. Could be related to service learning projects. But lots of schools that are opting into peer networks that we're working with are setting them up as lunch groups.

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So weekly lunch hangout, kids with and without autism coming together around interests and hobbies. And I just put a list here of some of the most popular games and you might think high schoolers especially like are too old for games. But I will say absolutely they are not. That these kids have the most fun. These are some of our favorite games.

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I put an asterisk next to ones that don't require any verbal communication. So certainly we want students across lots of different dimensions to be involved. So those are games that are favorites for students who are not communicating verbally. So those are some ideas and you may have some other favorites that you use at your school site.

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In supporting PMI for students in the spectrum, on the spectrum in middle school, our high school peers have a pivotal role to play. It begins with understanding that their preferences key. Their willingness to engage as fundamental. Peers who are genuinely interested and excited about developing social relationships with their classmates on the spectrum can serve as positive peer models for others.

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They may share a common interest or experience which can deepen connections, especially for students on the spectrum. Whether it's through shared classes or allocated time such as lunch or breaks, peers have the opportunity to foster meaningful interactions. Their motivation and enthusiasm can be sustained throughout the semester, contributing to the overall supportive and neurodiverse affirming school environment. Peers can champion understanding, acceptance, and support for neurodiversity within their school setting, ensuring that all students can thrive socially and academically by educating themselves about autism, practicing empathy, and advocate actively promoting inclusion.

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Potential topics to cover in peer network meetings of all students, not just those on the spectrum, include strengths, interests, communication preferences, and group goals. An example depicted here is a student that is non-speaking using the communication board with colors that the peer network group created for him so he can engage in the crafting activity. Establishing trust, the confidentiality within the peer network encourages deeper connections. What is shared in the network,

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stays in the network, particularly any developmental differences that are disclosed. Facilitators are available to address any unsafe topics that may come up.

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Victoria brings up an important point. So with each of these, there is a facilitator. So in peer supports, it's the teacher who's teaching that class that can facilitate these peer supports, can help with seatings and can help check in and touch base with groups. For peer networks that happen outside of clubs that have an advisor, a moderator already, it's generally a teacher that's taking that on during one lunch period during the week.

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And that's where we turn to those school champions and they're, at the beginning, you know, more heavily engaged, the facilitators. So checking in with students, having them share when they saw each other that week or what they did, helping to plan with the activities that are, to what game they're going to do or if they're going to do an art project. And then reminding them of their next meeting, encouraging them to check in with each other throughout the week.

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And I just want to end, to remind us all, I think we hear stories about middle and high school students, and some of us do have a lived experience that is not as positive. But I can share from

our work. When students are armed with this information about neurodiversity in that work around peer networks, we are really seeing that their capacity to be more inclusive, to be more affirming is blossoming.

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And I love this example here. So this is just a still shot from one of our peer networks. And the young man who's wearing that Duke hoodie with the D facing this way, is on the spectrum and communicates primarily through whispering or through writing. His peer network was just showing him, "Hey. Using a dry erase board might be helpful for him."

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Also for comprehension. And so they would either write or draw information for him. So in this slide are all playing Jenga. And on each Jenga, there is a question. And so this peer just writes the question for him so he can fully participate and, you know, sharing that one time and that group was able to do that.

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And I love their reaction. That's when the, that's when they pulled out the Jenga piece and all of that. All of the pieces fell down onto the table. So just really empowering. The peers in these settings to help be a part of building this connected community. I'm going to turn it over to Victoria to share more about some of our resources which is the next piece on our agenda.

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So yeah. I'm going to share you some resources. Just a quick reminder, you can find these resources in the handouts pane. AFIRM or Autism Focused Intervention Resources and Modules are free online learning modules for evidence based practices identified by the National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice. These modules are designed for special and general education teachers as well as related service providers and early interventionists.

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They provide step by step information on planning for using and monitoring an EBP related to peer supports and peer networks. AFIRM has a peer mediated instruction and inventory intervention module.

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The CSESA or the Center for Secondary Education for Students with Autism was a research and developmental development project funded by the D.o.e. that focused on developing, adapting, and studying comprehensive school and community based education programs for high school students on the spectrum. CSESA has over 100 resources for educators, families, and students, including the peer to peer series

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as mentioned earlier in the webinar, which were written by individuals on the spectrum. And they also have an at a glance autism series. CSESA has multiple resources for fostering peer supports and peer networks in school settings as well. Building Inclusive High School Communities for Autistic Students is a free, open access article written by colleagues here at UNC that discusses the benefits of an inclusive environment and provides strategies for building an inclusive community.

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Thanks! And here we are at the Q&A. I'll turn it over to you Kat.

00:51:00:22 - 00:51:22:12

Fantastic. What a great presentation. Thank you Kara and Victoria. So that concludes the presentation portion. But it begins the Q&A session of today's webinar. As a reminder, please submit your questions through the questions pane in the Control panel. And because our time is limited, we may not be able to get through all of the questions. If there are any questions that we don't get to today, we'll try to get back to you by email.

00:51:22:19 - 00:51:47:10

So I'm going to start with one question here is: "Do you have any recommendations on how to sensitize and educate other teachers, colleagues, as well as, students to assist them in understanding that autistic students are still students, even if they have particularities that may impede their ability to socialize with others?"

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I think that one is coming to me Victoria? Yeah. Okay. Yeah. Yeah. Yes. So I think as much as we can do to share the autism experience, as we mentioned, there is some nice research that doing peer education around autism like that Kits for Kids. There's a number of studies done that can help them understand their autism.

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I think helping them understand that they're typical kids and have, you know, often similar interests can come through engagement. And so these, extra curriculums or clubs, the opportunity for students to start clubs related to their interests where others can get engaged and involved. So I think just being open to, sharing across the school about autism, but also having opportunities for students to get involved in things that are maybe not autism specific, but are really linked to who they are and what their interests are.

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Wonderful. "So what role do extracurricular activities and clubs play in building community within middle and high schools?" Service oriented clubs, groups, and extracurricular activities serve as invaluable spaces for fostering a sense of belonging and community. There are opportunities to explore interests and develop friendships outside of the academic arena. They contribute to an inclusive school community by encouraging collaboration, leadership, and personal growth.

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They can also be a great place to, you know, become a club leader and to just have a more connected feeling with other students in general.

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All right. So our next question: “Would peer support and peer networks also help our low functioning kids?” Now that's a great question. And really Eric Carter, who is probably that a researcher that I think really has led the movement around peer supports and peer networks, really started them for students who were served in, I would say less inclusive environments, as a way to help to build more broad connection and community.

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So almost all of his work around peer supports and peer networks is serving students who have more support needs. And so, absolutely. They're great. They're a great match. And you saw just a couple of our examples and that certainly including individuals who have very ways of communication may communicate less verbally. We're like, you know, greatly engaged and involved in the peer networks.

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So it's, you know, that's part of this orientation, is helping each other know what are the strengths needs of everyone in the group? So targeting that the student uses visuals to communicate. And what is the way that works best for you to communicate? So absolutely. For all for students, across every support mid range peer support and peer networks have shown to be efficacious.

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While there are some great questions coming in here, it looks like we only have time for maybe 1 or 2 more questions. So let's do one more and possibly a second if we have time. “What if students say they are not interested in making social connections at school?” That's okay. While social connections can play a vital role in personal and academic growth, it's important to respect the student's autonomy.

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Their decisions, their choices. They might have a connection outside of school or simply feel not inclined towards socializing. Building connections requires genuine interest and energy. Like we mentioned earlier, their preference, interest is key to building successful social connections. Although, it may help that they know of specific opportunities around their interests. Sometimes the hang up might be just the logistics or anxiety of the first time

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that's daunting. And so helping to alleviate some of those concerns may help the student be more open if they are genuinely interested and just seem like it.

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Wonderful. So many good questions. Do we have time for one more before we close out? Okay. "So how do we advocate starting a peer support group and or peer network in our school district if no existing one exists? Can I, as a parent, advocate for that?" Yeah, absolutely. So we start peer networks at about 30 high schools where in most schools they did not exist.

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And certainly parents can help start. But it is trying to find one champion in the school that can help move the effort forward. So I usually say hit up the guidance counselor. Hit up the school social worker. You can definitely start with a special educator or often related service personnel are great folks to take that on because it often aligns with some of the goals that they already have for their students.

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So it does help, I think, to have one school ally and think about it's okay to start small. So one of our high schools, we started with one network and at the end of the year we have 15 networks

happening on all different lunch days with different staff engaging in those. So trying to find one school based ally is a great way.

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And knowing that you can start small. The other thing is to try to align with existing duties that that person already has. So the media center person was already in the media center during lunch period, so that served as a natural. She was very fine to have them happening in the media center. So if there's ways to align with work that's already been done, that's another way to get them up and running.

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Wow. This is a fantastic presentation not only for the spectrum kids, but also any kids going into middle school or high school. So thank you both. That wraps up our our webinar today and our spring webinar series on education. And thank you again Kara and Victoria. Thank you everyone for joining us. And if you found today's event helpful, we encourage you to check out our past webinars of this series, Autism Education, located on OAR's website under the 'Get Involved' tab.

00:58:17:19 - 00:58:38:19

Once you close out of today's event, you will receive an exit survey and we do appreciate it if you could complete that and provide your feedback. Everyone will receive a follow up email today with their certificate of attendance. On behalf of the Organization for Autism Research, thank you for joining us and have a great rest of your day.