

Seattle Center Academy: Reach For It  
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**Seattle Center Academy** is a summer arts program for middle school students that provides youth with opportunities to participate in music, dance, visual arts, video production and the exploration of science. This two-week program takes place on the Seattle campus. This program offers the best arts and sciences experiences for young people to discover their full personal, social, artistic and scientific potential. The two weeks culminate in a final day of presentations, visual art displays and a showcase performance for students, faculty, parents, family and friends.

Within the larger Academy is a program for youth with disabilities. *Reach For It* is an integral part of the Academy, providing opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in the larger program. Students in *Reach For It* have a range of more significant disabilities, including autism, developmental disabilities, visual and hearing impairments and physical disabilities. These students are each assigned a mentor to assist them in their classes, help with any questions or problems that may occur and participate with them as they are learning new skills. The mentors are typically in the ninth and tenth grade and have attended the Seattle Center Academy while in middle school.

The initial study found that the Seattle Center Academy was unique in the opportunities provided for young students to work closely with highly talented professionals from Seattle's foremost arts organizations and exceptional in the inclusion of youth with disabilities. The young people with disabilities are students seldom included at the degree that was observed at the Academy. In addition to full inclusion for the majority of these students, participation in the Academy meant that each boy or girl was learning new skills, meeting new friends, and working with the larger class towards a final project or production.

### **Faculty Surveys:**

The entire faculty preferred to have students with disabilities in their classes and felt it was a positive experience for all. The faculty identified many positive aspects of including students in *Reach For It* in their classes.

Three themes emerged from the information gathered from the teacher surveys. Teachers believed that the students with disabilities added a unique characteristic to the class as a whole, bringing an added perspective of excitement to the class. The students from *Reach For It* were described by the teachers as willing to move beyond the self-conscious middle school age persona and take risks, be silly and try new things. This added to the class and often the other students would try new things because of this attitude.

The second theme apparent from the surveys was that the teachers were pushed to be better at what they did because of the presence of the students in *Reach For It*. Students that learn differently than the classroom norm often cause teachers to use pedagogy that is more inclusive and ultimately assists all students in learning.

The third theme evidenced from the teacher surveys was that including young people with disabilities in their classes and providing opportunities for all the children to work

together benefits society as a whole. The teachers wrote that the inclusion of students with disabilities in their class was a model for what they wanted for all the students when they were adults.

Mentors were considered an important component to the success of *Reach For It* by the faculty. The mentors were identified as “making the experience positive for the students and the teachers.” This was repeated in the majority of faculty surveys. One teacher noted that, “Initially I was concerned (about having students with disabilities in the class) but the mentors really made the difference.”

### **Mentor Surveys:**

All of the mentors surveyed had been a student at Seattle Center Academy. The mentors were divided evenly with half in their first year of mentoring, while the other half were in their second or third year of mentoring.

The students were asked why they had decided to be a mentor. The majority of the students noted that they wanted to provide an opportunity for the students with disabilities to have as positive an experience as they had while a student in the Academy. They wrote, “To help a student have as much fun as I did”, “I wanted to come back and show kids the same great experience that I had”, and “I love the SCA program and wanted to come back and help them have the same fun”. “I just wanted to give back”, “I like the idea of helping someone else”, and one articulate student wrote, “To be a friend to someone who ordinarily is not necessarily included by his/her peers; to help them erase the differences between them and fellow students for two weeks.”

The mentors were asked about their work as mentors. All of the mentors described the experience as very positive. One of the experienced mentors wrote that the work helped “build patience” and provided “opportunities for leadership and to become a role-model.” Other comments included:

- I liked including the students in the environment rather than excluding them.
- I loved the way my student sees things so differently.
- Making someone feel special, like they have a friend.
- Helping others become comfortable with people with disabilities.
- Helping my student express himself through art.

A mentor described their student as “seeing things so differently” and said this was the most positive aspect of working with the students in *Reach For It*. This information aligns with the teacher surveys. The students in *Reach For It* had a different way of participating in the classes, adding their own personalities and unique talents, questions and participation. The mentors and teachers valued this contribution.

- I learned to actually value the differences in other because they are much more advanced in some areas than I am.
- I learned not to have expectations of people.
- To be patient and understanding.... most of all patient.

- You can't expect everyone to always be able to do something. This has tested my patience.
- You really need to pay attention.
- (I learned) how to go beyond the stereotype of a disable person and form a new perspective of disability by casting off my preconceptions and allowing myself to dissolve the difference between the two of us.
- Oh, where to start...I have learned a LOT!

The mentors were asked what, if anything they had learned from their experience. They responded that they had learned patience, commitment, understanding and respect. In addition a number of mentors wrote that they "had fun" with their student. Many learned that "disability" is just "learning something differently."

### **Student Interviews:**

Students in the Seattle Center Academy were surveyed and provided valuable information for the inclusion of students in *Reach For It*. The students were asked about having students with disabilities in their classes.

Of the 219 students that responded, 67% said it was a positive experience for them, they liked having the students included in their class and they would not change anything about having students included in their class and they would not change anything about having students from *Reach For It* in their classes.

Students that had comments about the inclusion of students in *Reach For It* agreed with both the teachers and the mentors in acknowledging that the students brought a sense of humor, a willingness to try anything and the comment repeated many times, "I really like how (he or she) doesn't care what anyone thinks. They are okay being different and funny." This seemed to be something that these young students respected. Although this is the age when many middle schools students are most self-conscious, they admired these students' (*Reach For It*) efforts to try anything and the sense of joy that they brought to their class.

### **Parent Interviews:**

Parents of the students in *Reach For It* were interviewed two months after the conclusion of the Seattle Art Academy. The purpose of waiting two months was to determine if there were more lasting effects from the Academy as well as provide a time lag between the excitement of the final day of the performances and a return to everyday activities for the families.

The parents had many comments and much to say in regard to *Reach For It*. The parents were very willing to talk about the experiences of having their children in the academy. All of the comments and input was positive. The questions and responses follow.

1. What made you decide to enroll your child in the Seattle Center Academy?

It is often difficult and frightening for parents with children with disabilities to let their children attend a week-long program that is unfamiliar, not in their own school and with people that they do not know. Particularly for students with communication difficulties it may be a difficult decision to make. The parents that were interviewed were encouraged by the information on the flyers that, as a parent stated, “..stood out clearly that they would provided accommodations.”

Once parents learned of *Reach For It* within the Seattle Center Academy, they either talked with friends or teachers that know about the Academy or they called the Seattle Center. A number of parents commented on their initial contact with the Center. Many said that is was a very positive experience talking to the first person that answered the phone. The parents commented that this person “knew about the program and knew what to say that led them to believe that accommodations would be provided and that there was support.” A parent notes, “It is the whole family that is impacted by the disability. I don’t event know how to bring it up sometimes when trying to find opportunities for my child. I sometimes just hang up because I don’t know just what to say.” Parents said about the initial contact:

- I thought there would be someone there (Seattle Center) I could communicate with and talk to.
- I felt like I could reach someone if there was a problem.
- We were delighted to hear that there would be a mentor. Our child needs that help throughout the day.
- I was intrigued by the teen mentor and thought it would make this a much more positive experience.
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## 2. What went well for your child?

All of the parents were very excited and positive about their child’s experience in *Reach For It* and the Seattle Center Academy. The following are comments directly from parents but were also discussed and supported by many of the other parents during the interviews.

- This experience has carried over into school. He talks about it all the time. He has more confidence than he has ever had before.
- It was so great. She loved every minute of it. She took away a felling of confidence that I still see everyday.
- Her mentor was phenomenal. She didn’t really know how to be friend but her mentor taught her. If I could pay someone to do that for her every day I would.
- He is around special ed (sic) kids too much and this helped him be socially appropriate.
- The mentor was really, really important to me. They just helped him figure out, “Were to sit?”, “What happens at lunch?”
- It was absolutely the best camp experience he has ever had. We can think of nothing to improve this.

In addition to learning from the mentors and having the opportunity to be included with all the students, the learning that occurs in the classroom can have a significant impact on the young person's life. Prior to attending the Academy one student was unable to distinguish between "make believe" and reality. He was unable to see films with fight scenes because he did not understand that these scenes were not real. His mother said that after participating in the serious comedy class he "gets it". The teacher included him in the class, and provided opportunities for him to truly integrate with other students. The final production on the last day of class was designed in such a way as to allow the student to use his strengths and not have difficulties with his limitations. The mother said, "My heart was touched so much" when her son took center stage on the last day of class.

### **Conclusion:**

The large majority of students, teachers, mentors, parents and students in Reach For It depict the Seattle Center Academy as extremely positive for the youth with disabilities and overall, a positive experience for everyone in the Academy. The benefits of this program are far-reaching in the lives of everyone involved. Because of the students in *Reach For It*, teachers "teach better" for all the students in their class and learn new ways of providing instruction that benefit more than the students with disabilities.

The students in the Academy that have the chance to learn with, laugh with and become friends with the students in *Reach For It* are better for this opportunity. They respect the risk that these young people with disabilities take in their classes.

The mentors provided the opportunity to "be a leader, to show others the importance of caring" and learn many new skills including "patience". They serve as role models, teaching the students in *Reach For It* how to "be cool", according to the mother of a young person in the program.

The parents of the children with disabilities are heartened, thrilled and amazed at what their son or daughter was able to learn in the two weeks that they are on the Seattle campus. They were initially excited to know that the Academy "truly accommodates" for the needs of their child and all were extremely happy that this did, in fact, happen for their child.

Although the benefits to the community within the Seattle Center Academy and to the community at large are far-reaching, the benefits to the *Reach For It* students is ultimately the most important. An example of this was observed in the first days of the Academy. The students in the theater class were asked to participate in an activity in which they would discuss "popularity" and class standing with peers. Numbers from one to ten were laced on ten of the students' backs. The students did not know what number was on their back. The teacher told the other students these numbers represented the most popular or "coolest kid" in the class with the number one and the least "cool" with the number 10. Without speaking, the students without numbers were to interact with the students, treating them according to their rank on the "popularity continuum".

One of the students in *Reach For It* has the number one on her back. After a few minutes of acting, the students with the numbers were asked to guess what number they had on their back from the way the other students interacted with them. They were told to stand in a line from one to ten and tell the class what number they thought they had. The student from *Reach For It* stood at the first of the line. She told her mentor that she knew she was “number one” because she had always been “number ten”. This young girl with significant disabilities knew what it felt like to be “number ten” in the popularity contest of middle school students. She said, “I get to be number one today.” *Reach For It* provides the opportunity for all the students to have the spotlight and to be number one for a day.

Middle school students are at an age not quite teen-agers yet not quite children. They are excited to try new activities, learn new skills and take risks. Yet they do not want to appear different or stand out from their peers. This is an opportune time to expose these young people to the arts, to diversity and to disability. There is also the opportunity to teach the students at the Seattle Center Academy to truly be inclusive of others by example as well as time to process and learn about each other. The Seattle Center Academy continues as an example of what we might hope for in both education and in society.

Thank you for providing me the chance to study this program and to learn from those that give so many hours and energy to this very successful academy.

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