

After School Matters' Programming for Teens with Disabilities

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All teens deserve access to high quality out-of-school time (OST) programming that recognizes and meets their diverse needs. Research shows that inclusive OST programming can improve social, academic, and life skills for teens with disabilities, while also fostering peer learning and reducing stigma among youth with and without disabilities (Afterschool Alliance, 2021). Yet, **most youth with disabilities encounter barriers to participating in OST** (e.g., fewer programs equipped to meet diverse needs, lack of trained staff, higher cost; Afterschool Alliance, 2021).

Inclusive Programming and Supports at After School Matters

Inclusion is central to the mission of After School Matters (ASM). In line with our organizational focus to provide high-quality enrichment opportunities and supports for Chicago youth from different neighborhoods, ethnicities, races, and gender identities, **ASM offers inclusive programming opportunities for teens with disabilities.**

Programming for Teens with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

While teens with disabilities participate in all types of programs offered each session, ASM has developed two program models specifically for teens with intellectual and developmental disabilities: **(1) Daytime and afterschool programs** in partnership with select CPS high schools, and **(2) Buddies Exploration programs** that use a mentorship model, pairing teens with and without disabilities.

Similar to all ASM programs, these initiatives provide a dedicated space for teens to **develop meaningful relationships and friendships** with their peers and instructors while **building technical skills** across a variety of content areas as well as other **critical life skills** that help prepare them for the future, **all while earning a stipend.**

Over the past 15 years,^{*} ASM offered **more than 550 programs** specifically designed for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities, **servicing nearly 5,000 teens.**

Other Supports

ASM also offers **other supports for some teens with disabilities to make programming more accessible** (e.g., ASL interpretation, identifying programs that are good fit), as well as **professional development (PD) opportunities** for instructors throughout the year that are focused on inclusion.

Teen Feedback and Impact

To ensure programs remain high-quality, supportive, and impactful, teens share their feedback each session through one of two surveys of their choosing: a longer survey sent to all teens or a shorter, simplified version that was designed for teens with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Keep reading to learn more about the recent experiences of ASM participants!

Inclusive Programming Locations

ASM provides programming specifically designed for teens with disabilities citywide, including at our four flagship sites and six CPS locations.



ASM Flagship Sites

- ASM @ Orleans
- Gallery 37 Center for the Arts
- ASM @ Gately Park
- The Michael and Karyn Lutz Center

CPS Sites

- Jacqueline B Vaughn Occupational High School
- Kenwood Academy High School
- Northside Learning Center High School
- Ray Graham Training Center High School
- Southside Occupational Academy High School
- Whitney M Young Magnet High School

^{*}Data reflects the earliest period for which ASM has access to complete program participation records.

Daytime and After School Programs for Teens with Disabilities

In partnership with Chicago Public Schools (CPS), ASM offers programs that are designed specifically to engage teens who primarily have intellectual and developmental disabilities or impaired adaptive functioning and attend CPS Occupational High Schools or high schools with cluster programs.

The daytime programs utilize an innovative approach where teens **attend an ASM program during the school day** either at one of ASM's flagship buildings or at select schools, **making creative use of unused program space** during the day.

These programs are led by ASM instructors who are experts in their crafts and supported by CPS teachers and staff. Teens explore specific content areas (e.g., theater, baking) and learn technical and life skills that foster independence and prepare them for life after high school. ASM also offers a few after-school programs at select high schools for teens with disabilities (e.g., drumline, podcasting).

2025 Program Impact

In 2025, nearly **500 teens** participated in 52 Daytime and After School Programs. Teens and their parents/guardians shared that participants **developed practical work and life skills in safe, supportive, and fun environments that helped prepare them for their futures.**



9 in 10

teens felt connected to or got along with their peers and instructors*



84%

of teens said that their program helped them prepare for the future**



87%

of teens said that their program helped them learn or improve their skills*

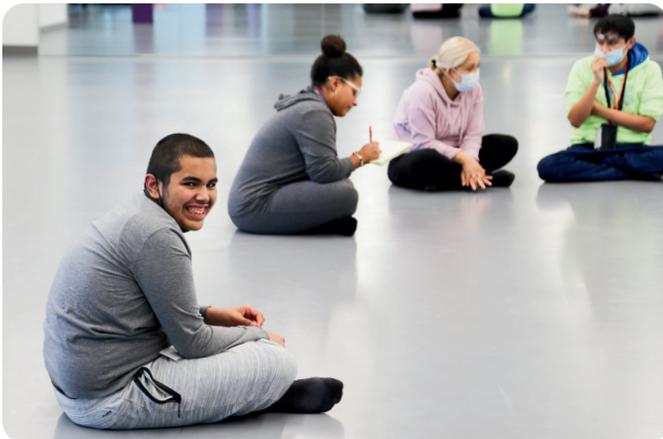


88%

of teens said that they had fun in their program*

“ I liked learning new recipes and now I want to use the cookbooks I have at home that I never used and make a recipe. The first one I want to make is avocado toast and fried eggs. ”

-ASM Teen in Baking Exploration



◀ **Program Highlight:** At ASM's Art & Theater Exploration program, teens practice creative storytelling through multiple modalities. The program culminates with teens developing and presenting an original theatrical performance at the end of session showcase.

“ I used to be afraid to advocate for myself, but ASM has helped me a lot by making me captain of the bass drum. ”

-ASM Teen in Ray Graham Drumline & Color Guard

“ I most value the experience of a "job" for my daughter. She will not be working competitively after high school and I appreciate that she was able to participate in that capacity. ”

-ASM Parent/Guardian

*Feedback is averaged across participants who completed the longer survey sent to all teens and the shorter survey for teens with disabilities.

**Includes feedback only from participants who completed the longer survey sent to all teens.

Buddies Exploration Programs

Developed in 2019 to expand inclusive program spaces for teens with disabilities, the Exploration programs **pair teens with disabilities with one of their peers without a disability** from the Buddies program.

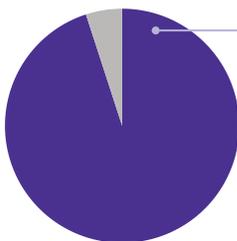
Buddies and Explorers **use art as a gateway to develop new skills, build friendships, and foster an atmosphere of inclusion in their programming spaces.** These programs are hosted at ASM's flagship locations. Sometimes, the teens with disabilities then go on to participate in other ASM programs (e.g., mosaic arts, culinary arts).

“ This program has grown my teen socially in ways I could have never expected. He found work ethic and time management. ”

-ASM Parent/Guardian

2025 Program Impact

In 2025, **116 teens** participated in **22 Buddies Exploration Programs.** The vast majority of teens (both teens with and without disabilities) and their parents/guardians shared that instructors created welcoming spaces where **participants built strong peer connections, felt comfortable being themselves, and developed confidence in their skills and abilities.***



Over 95%...

of teens said that their program gave them a safe space to be themselves

of teens and parents/guardians said that the program created a sense of belonging

of teens said that they met people they wouldn't have otherwise

Program Highlight: ►

Teen ambassadors in the Lutz Buddies Exploration program spoke with guests about their handmade creations, including coasters, 3D puzzles, and pipe cleaner creatures, at the Fall 2025 showcase.



Exploring Together

In Summer 2025, Buddies and Explorers at Gallery 37 went on field trips to the National Museum of Mexican Art, the Shedd Aquarium, and the Adler Planetarium. By navigating the city together, teens built relationships and leadership skills in a safe and supportive environment.

“ Gallery Buddies has impacted me by making me a kinder and more outgoing person. By making friends with people who have all different types of disabilities, I've come to appreciate more of how every person is wonderful, and that friends come from all places that you might not expect. I also have become more outgoing and willing to put myself out there because I know that the result is making new friends and new experiences. ”

-ASM Teen in Gallery Buddies



*Includes data from participants with and without disabilities who completed the longer survey sent to all teens.

The Takeaways

ASM aims to provide **high-quality and meaningful** youth development programming for all teens across Chicago, including those with disabilities. Participants in ASM's programs designed specifically for teens with intellectual and developmental disabilities report overwhelmingly positive experiences. Teens share that **instructors create safe, welcoming, and fun program spaces** where they are able to **form supportive relationships** with peers and instructors. Moreover, through hands-on, project-based learning, **teens try new things and develop technical and life skills that help prepare them for the future.**

Through our decades of work providing opportunities, supports, and specialized programming for teens with disabilities, ASM has learned:

By providing inclusive programs, youth development organizations can **fill a crucial gap and expand access to enrichment opportunities** that positively and significantly impact the lives of teens with disabilities.

Through **intentional partnerships with specialized schools**, OST organizations can provide more integrated and impactful enrichment opportunities for students with disabilities.

Youth development **buildings and spaces can be used in creative ways** during the underutilized daytime hours to create more opportunities for teens in school-based programs.

ALL teens benefit when OST organizations design and offer inclusive programs that meet teens' diverse needs.

ASM remains committed to utilizing feedback shared by teens, instructors, and parents/guardians to **sustain, innovate, and strengthen our inclusive program opportunities** for teens with disabilities across both intentionally designed initiatives and standard program models.

“ *Every teen brought in different levels of skills and experience. A few teens were nonverbal at the beginning of the session, but learned to use their words to ask for things towards the end. Some teens needed extra help working on their pieces, but over time, they learned to ask for help from their peers before asking their instructors.* ”

-ASM Instructor



Acknowledgements

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