THE OPPORTUNITY INITIATIVE

Ty Bever, Nana Danso, Ilana Hayutin, Will Holtzmann, and Rosie Whyte
Dear Friends and Community Members,

Since the beginning of September of 2017, our team has been working to increase accessibility of empowerment opportunities to youth with disabilities. We initiated a mentorship program with students in the special education department at Asbury Elementary School. As part of the program, we connected these students with organizations that specialize in youth empowerment including Access Gallery and Special Olympics of Colorado. Building close personal relationships and fostering both cognitive and emotional growth in our students has been one of the most transformational and gratifying experiences of our college careers. By making Asbury Elementary a Serve to Lead site for future volunteers, this mutual transformational change in our community will continue.

We would like to personally thank Mr. Cole, Asbury’s special education teacher, for his boundless enthusiasm and willingness to partner with our team. We would also like to thank the students in Classroom 206; the memories we shared are timeless, and we are so excited to watch them foster their true identities and untapped potential in years to come.

Sincerely,
Ty Bever, Nana Danso, Ilana Hayutin, Will Holtzmann, and Rosalie Whyte
MISSION STATEMENT

The Opportunity Initiative works to increase access to empowerment opportunities for at-risk youth with disabilities. Through mentorship programs, we form strong, intimate relationships with our students as well as connect them with organizations that specialize in youth enrichment.
Our Team Members

Rosalie Whyte is interested in child psychology and the effects of experience-dependent opportunities on developmental outcomes. She volunteers at Colorado Children’s Hospital and is interested in the therapeutic effects of play.

Will Holtzmann volunteered at Wellspring Community for over four years. This center provides enrichment classes and assisted work opportunities to young adults with special needs.

Ilana Hayutin has been volunteering for the Special Olympics of Colorado for over seven years and has been interested in the therapeutic effects of sports on mental health ever since.
Nana Danso is studying cognitive neuroscience and is passionate about health equity. She also volunteered at Craig Hospital, which specializes in brain and spinal cord injury.

Ty Bever is studying medicine and has volunteered with the Special Olympics of Colorado and the Children’s Hospital of Colorado, which has motivated his interest in youth health practices.
The Opportunity Initiative focuses on child development because the early years of an individual’s life are critical for predicting future success. Transitions from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school are specifically vulnerable periods. During these transitions, children with disabilities are likely to be marginalized because of their status. Cognitive or physical disabilities can restrict children from participating in social and physical activities.

This is especially a problem with children from low-income families. In combination with stigmatization associated with their disability, these children are barred from participation because their families do not have a surplus of financial resources necessary to engage in specialized enrichment opportunities. It is important for any child to have exposure to different developmentally enriching activities, and it is even more integral for youth with disabilities. Empowerment opportunities like art and physical activities can serve as a therapeutic release for this population and aid in their cognitive and social development.
We wanted to form genuine connections and authentic relationships with youth with disabilities, so we established a mentorship program at Asbury Elementary School. We partnered with Mr. Cole’s 4th and 5th grade special education program in Classroom 206. Starting in February, our team members went to Classroom 206 every week and got to know the kids. We played games, read books, and created art masterpieces.

Mr. Cole emphasized the need for more individualized academic attention, so we adopted the role of paraprofessionals in the classroom and worked with the students on math problems, spelling, and time-telling. Our weekly hang-outs were mostly student led, because we wanted the kids to express what they needed rather than what we wanted to see. Because the kids were the center of attention, most of the mentorship time was spent building castles with legos, running trains, and playing the bad guy in their superhero fantasy.
The Outcome: Day of Play

After months of planning, we were able to organize a “Day of Play” with our two partner organizations to fulfill our goal of providing therapeutic and recreational opportunities to students with disabilities. Teaching artists from Access Gallery came to Asbury Elementary on May 24, 2018 to conduct an art lesson with the students. This lesson focused on visual symmetry by creating mandalas. The outcome of this program exceeded our expectations. Each child was thoroughly engaged throughout the activity and was able to express their uniqueness and creativity through art.

Mr. Cole was thankful that our group organized this special event, and he recognized the benefits that our program provided for his students. This “Day of Play” forged a lasting partnership between Access Gallery and Asbury Elementary, and this relationship will hopefully be maintained and built upon for years to come.

“It held their focus and attention and not many things can do that.”

-Paraprofessional at Asbury
Timeline

September 2017: Brainstormed issue and formed team

October 2017: Researched potential stakeholders and experts

November 2017: Contacted and met with identified stakeholders

December 2017: Compiled feedback from community members and started to formulate and design project

January 2018: Partnered with an elementary school in Denver Public Schools to implement mentorship program

February 2018: Partnership broke off with school in DPS; Met with Mr. Cole at Asbury Elementary
March 2018

Planned enrichment activities with Mr. Cole, specifically “Day of Play” with Access Gallery; Started mentorship sessions.

April 2018

Mentorship sessions interrupted by school testing and spring break; Continued planning “Day of Play” and began tutoring the kids at the end of the month.

May 2018

Continued weekly mentorship and tutoring sessions; Implemented “Day of Play” with an art lesson from Access Gallery at Asbury Elementary; Began establishing Classroom 206 as a Serve to Lead Site for PLP freshmen.

Beyond

PLP freshmen will be able to complete their service requirement at Asbury Elementary (potential for more CCI projects); Asbury Elementary and Access Gallery will likely be long-lasting partners.
Results and Impact

Quantitative Measures

70 combined hours with the students

10 new best friends

5 new mentors

1 new partnership
Qualitative Measures

Social Behavior

A primary goal of our group was to serve as mentors for Mr. Cole’s students and help them learn socially acceptable behaviors. As we began to get to know our students, we were able to discourage behavioral issues that we became aware of. For example, we were able to encourage two students to play together respectfully despite them fighting with each other frequently.

“I would like my students to continue to grow in their socially acceptable behaviors... Your group from DU has helped hold the students accountable for their actions”
–Mr. Cole

Academic Tutoring

Every time we mentored Mr. Cole’s students, we worked individually with each kiddo to reinforce the content of Mr. Cole’s lesson plans. For example, one class period we assisted students in learning how to read analog clocks. We saw significant improvement in each student we worked with, with some students going from not being able to read clocks at all to understanding the meaning of both the small and large hands.
“I’m so happy you care so much about my students.”

–Mr. Cole

“Having you in the classroom two days a week is so important. You give the students the personalized attention they need”

–Mr. Cole
Community Partners

Though we reached out to over 20 stakeholders during the course of this project, **Asbury Elementary School** and **Access Gallery** truly made this vision a reality. Asbury Elementary is a diverse elementary school in close proximity to DU, and their special education program focuses on students with moderate to severe cognitive and physical disabilities. Access Gallery is a nonprofit organization that allows youth with disabilities to benefit from the arts. We connected these two organizations in a partnership that will provide **unique opportunities for the students in the future.**
Additional Stakeholders

- Special Olympics Colorado
- Parkhill Elementary
- Cory Elementary
- Outdoor Buddies
- Denver Academy
- Denver Montessori Junior/ Senior High School
- AUL
- The Cycle of Hope
- CRAIG
- Wellspring Community
Special thanks to...

Asbury Elementary
Access Gallery
Pioneer Leadership Program
Additional Stakeholders