



### “STAND UP FOR JUSTICE”

Sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council of the  
Jewish Federation of Greater Naples

Application deadline: February 2, 2024

Applicant’s name: Jennifer Szczepekowski Applicant’s email: SzczeJ@collierschools.com  
 PreK-ESE, PreK, Kindergarten, 1<sup>st</sup> Grade,  
 Number of years in education: 17 Grade or subject taught: 9-12<sup>th</sup> Access ESE IBI, Transition Work Study IBI (ages 18-22)  
 School: Naples High School School Address: 1100 Golden Eagle Cir., Naples, FL 34102  
 Phone (daytime): 239-377-2340 Phone (evening): 239-289-5458  
 Principal’s name: Kristina Lee Principal’s email address: leeK1@Collierschools.com Principal’s Phone: 239-377-2200

- Describe the precipitating events that motivated you to initiate these lessons or activities
- Describe the lessons or activities; and if adapted from another source please reference
- Explain how the lessons or activities teach students the importance of respecting others no matter what religious, racial, cultural, or other differences exist
- Explain how it helped them counter bigotry and bullying and prepared them to stand up for Justice
- PROVIDE EVIDENCE/PROOF OF EFFECTIVENESS SUCH AS, BUT NOT LIMITED TO: A QUESTIONNAIRE, INTERVIEWS, DOCUMENTED ANECDOTAL CONVERSATIONS, AND STUDENT WRITINGS, VIDEO, ETC.

→All 5 bullet points must be completed or applicant will be advised to submit the following year. Please number each page along with your name at the top of each page.

Please complete the following if you have encouraged someone other than yourself to apply:

Your name: Laura Pacter Your email: pactel@collierschools.com  
 Phone (daytime): 239-377-2200 Phone (evening): 239-253-0143  
 Your relationship to this applicant: colleague, friend

Submit the completed form in writing, by email, or video format to:

Via email to: Renee at [rbialek@jewishnaples.org](mailto:rbialek@jewishnaples.org)

Or mail to

Beth Povlow, Educator Grant Coordinator, C/o JCRC, Jewish Federation of Greater Naples  
4720 Pine Ridge Rd., Naples, FL 34119

# **“Stand Up for Justice”**

## **Educator Grant**

*Sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council of the  
Jewish Federation of Greater Naples*

**Jennifer Szczepkowski**

**Nominated Applicant**

**Exceptional Student Education Teacher**

**Best Buddies Faculty Advisor**

## I. Introduction

My name is Jennifer Szczepkowski, and I work in the Collier County Public Schools as an Exceptional Student Education Teacher in the Transition Work Study Program working in the Intensive Behavior Intervention Level 2 Unit (IBI2). I teach life skills and job skills to students ages 18-22 at Naples High School, and I am the Faculty Advisor for the NHS Best Buddies Club. This is my 4<sup>th</sup> year teaching this age level and subject. My first 3 years at Naples High School, I worked with 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in the IBI2 unit, teaching all subjects through the ACCESS curriculum. Prior to teaching high school ESE, I taught elementary school for 10 years with CCPS, teaching Pre-K Varying Exceptionalities for 1 year, Kindergarten for 5 years, and 1<sup>st</sup> grade for 4 years. In addition, I coached Pole-Vault at Naples High School for 9 years while teaching elementary school. I began my teaching career at Child's Path Preschool teaching Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) for 2 years. I studied at the University of Florida for 4 years, earning a bachelor's degree in education, majoring in Early Childhood Education. I continued my education online at UF while working at Child's Path Preschool for two years, and I earned my master's degree in education, majoring in Special Education with emphasis on students with EBD (Emotional and Behavioral Disorders).

## II. Motivation for Change (*Precipitating Events*)

### a. Background in Change

As a founding member of the International Diversity Club of Alexis I. Dupont High School in Delaware in 2000, where I attended school for one semester, I have experience with building relationships among diverse cultures, races, religions, and other differences. The principal knew me because I was a brand-new student. She asked me to help start this club knowing that I have lived in Pennsylvania, Texas, Switzerland, Delaware, and Florida before the age of 17, and that I had already been an agent of change for our school by starting a dance team and becoming football season's cheer captain and a yearbook photographer. The principal's hope was that we could bring students closer together by meeting once a week to really discuss our differences, highlighting our similarities, resulting in a mutual respect for others. I remember the day we all sat in the cafeteria together. It was so powerful to see the students in surrounding cliques looking at our table of diverse cultures, races, religions, and personalities in shock. We did it once

a week, and we found that this action sparked conversations in our lunchmates on our off days.

**b. Best Buddies: Naples High**

A short time after arriving at Naples High School, a parent came to our principal and asked for opportunities for her child to find inclusion during the school day to build relationships with students outside of their self-contained IBI2 classroom. He shared her concerns with me and the name of the club she suggested was Best Buddies. Naturally, I was excited about providing opportunities for all NHS students to expand their scope and discover the joy of celebrating their differences. I signed up and became the Best Buddies Faculty Advisor with the hope of showing others that differences are what make us unique, and diversity is to be celebrated, not rejected, not silenced, or not stuck in one classroom all day.

**III. Taking Action** (*Activities*)

**a. Best Buddies Organization**

- i. **30- Second Video Best Buddies'** <https://youtu.be/VXyz1QcuA8I>
- ii. [www.BestBuddies.org](http://www.BestBuddies.org) is a resource for learning about the mission of the organization that has inspired me and our students to take action

and promote kindness and diversity in our school and community.



## Mission

Best Buddies International is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to establishing a global volunteer movement that creates opportunities for one-to-one friendships, integrated employment, leadership development, and inclusive living for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

## Who We Serve

The IDD community that Best Buddies serves includes, but is not limited to, people with Down syndrome, autism, Fragile X, Williams syndrome, cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injury and other undiagnosed disabilities.

## Programs

Best Buddies is the world's largest organization dedicated to ending the social, physical and economic isolation of the 200 million people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Our programs empower the special abilities of people with IDD by helping them form meaningful friendships with their peers, secure successful jobs, live independently, improve public speaking, self-advocacy and communication skills, and feel valued by society.

### b. Best Buddies: Naples High School Chapter

- i. **Meetings:** All NHS students are invited to join Best Buddies every other Wednesday for activities during lunch. Our activities are centered on giving students an opportunity to share how *they* celebrate the holidays and seasons of each month, while incorporating team building activities to make connections through shared interests. The Best Buddies' Leadership Team (students without Intellectual and Developmental Disability, IDD) at NHS selects a Buddy Director (a student with an IDD) to poll the members and advocate for all students in the club regarding the plan for each week. The leadership team and Buddy Director take that information and develop a plan for the activities for the next week.
- ii. **Events:** Some examples of our events include Best Buddies Luncheons, Monster Mash Buddy Matching Parties, Glow Parties, Thankful Thoughts Day, Winter Celebrations, Nerf Reindeer Hunts,

Leprechaun Scavenger Hunts, Boardgames Days, Dance Party, Chalk Art Day, Secret Valentine Match-Up, Spring Crafts, and more.

**IV. The Importance of Respecting Others** (*How*)

- a. At our initial meeting each year, I speak with all students about the purpose of our club: To provide opportunities for all students to come together to celebrate our differences and connect our hearts through discussion, collaboration, and shared interests, by listening and learning from each other. They understand how important it is to accept our differences and share that message with others. I used materials from the Best Buddies website and other materials provided by the Best Buddies Program Manager. And, if you ask our members, I speak from the heart about inclusion and diversity at every single meeting.
- b. Race, culture, religion, ability levels, and many other differences are naturally present at our meetings. Students join Best Buddies to make connections and find a safe place, so we teach students to talk about themselves, share their stories, and accept each other for differences, such as, race, culture, religion, or ability level, because you would not want others to judge you for yours. We do a lot of smiling and laughing in our club. The Best Buddies Leadership Team and Buddy Director plan is based on students' interests, which can be drastically different, so they can teach members not to laugh at each other, but to laugh with each other, through games and other events.
- c. Initially, our Best Buddies met weekly, in a classroom. Then, the club chose to meet their buddies in the very empty cafeteria, in front of non-members, yet still in public. As the club grew, I changed the routine for my class. I noticed that my students were only allowed to eat in the cafeteria, but they had to sit there for the rest of the long lunch period. So, I had given my students the opportunity to walk around campus and interact with other Best Buddies' members, so they could have a more inclusive experience and promote diversity in our school. Then, a few years after starting this club, the Best Buddies students without IDD began inviting students with IDD to join them at their lunch table, outdoors in front of all students. Ultimately, all students at our school became more aware of the differences in our school.

**V. Standing Up for Justice** (*Countering Bigotry and Bullying*)

- a. Our students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities face bullying and bigotry every day whether they are aware of it or not. I have personally seen it happen to our students when they are included with students without IDD. We must teach our students with IDD about being safe around strangers or students who are new to them. We must teach our students without IDD about differences, so our Best Buddies' club has done the follow to counter bigotry and bullying.

- i. Anti-Bullying Campaign (by Special Olympics)
- ii. Spread the Word to End the R-Word Campaign (by Special Olympics)
- iii. Dedication to uplifting fellow students with kindness through collaborative projects.

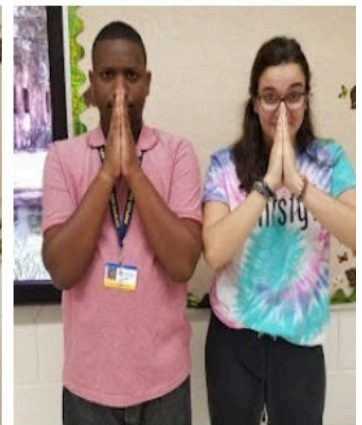
**VI. Effectiveness of Best Buddies Chapter at NHS***(Evidence)*

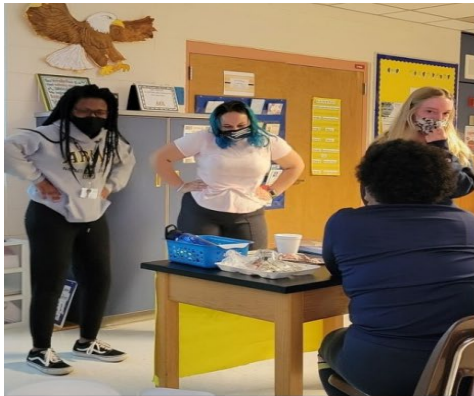
**a. Powerful Moments**

- i. Students with IDD being invited to sit with Best Buddies' members without IDD, every day and not just once a week.
- ii. The whole school cheering for a student with IDD while he rapped at NHS' lunchtime "Freestyle Fridays."
- iii. Best Buddies making friends, sharing phone numbers, and meeting up outside of school to go bowling.
- iv. Best Buddies filled out more than 200 cards for our Veterans in the state of Florida.
- v. Best Buddies performing together in the the district-wide Unique Talent Show.
- vi. In 2021, I was brought to tears when the number of students without IDD outweighed the number of students with IDD. There were 37 students, and maybe 18 students with IDD. This made it clear that our message was being shared, and that students were seeking a place where diversity was celebrated, called a Best Buddies' Meeting.

- b. Pictures (Photos are included for the review committee – If selected, please do not post the three pages of photos on your website. Thank you!)







**c. Other Documentation**

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January 26, 2024

Dear Committee Members of the Jewish Federation of Collier County,

I would like to highly recommend Jennifer Szczepkowski, Teacher at Naples High School, for the Stand Up for Justice Award for 2024. Ms. Szczepkowski is dedicated to working with students with disabilities, and with students in Naples High School general education classes to motivate our students to come together to create memorable experiences for each other, develop friendships, stand up for justice, and to help our community of Naples each day in a tremendous way, through acts of kindness in the Best Buddies Program.

Ms. Szczepkowski is a shining example of supportive leadership in educating her students to be kind to others, and she served as a club sponsor of the Best Buddies Organization for the past six years. She has generously paid for each year of membership to the main organization, too. Her students also do their own fundraising to create projects, which benefit our community members here in Collier County. Ms. Szczepkowski's students in Best Buddies created motivating greeting cards for Veterans who are actively serving in the military forces, and they also designed and created cards for residents of nursing homes in our area. One Saturday, this Best Buddies group of students also came together to package food for a local food Bank in Collier County to help members of our community who are food insecure, such as Seniors and local families.

Ms. Szczepkowski dedicates herself not just in her hard work with Best Buddies program, but also as a positive role model teacher in the Exceptional Student Education program here at Naples High School. She continuously motivates her students to develop and improve their communication skills, and she helps students build long lasting relationships within our community through participating in the Unified Sports Program, the Unified Talent Show, Workforce Partnership Programs, and through various community-based work experiences where students can develop leadership skills, help their community, and learn more about how to show unconditional love for others. Through her inspiring lessons, students become involved in volunteering more, and making a difference in the Best Buddies Organization, and with working with local businesses in Naples, too.

According to the Best Buddies website, this high school program, "fosters one-to-one friendships between high school students with and without disabilities. In this time of heightened social and emotional development that can be difficult for teenagers with and without disabilities, the Best Buddies High Schools Program helps break through social barriers at an important time in a young person's life." Ms. Szczepkowski positively supports this student-led program by providing guidance, mentorship, and by helping students create memorable events to meet and support each other, while building projects together to give to the community to make our community better, and to promote kindness in every student who participates in the Best Buddy Program.

Thank you for your consideration of Ms. Szczepkowski, and her Best Buddies Organization at Naples High School for the Stand Up for Justice Award 2024.

Sincerely,

  
Laura Pacter

ESE Inclusion Teacher

Murphy H. ...  
2025

1. How satisfied are you with your Best Buddies experience so far as a student? On a scale of one to five, please rate your satisfaction.

1

2

3

4

5

2. What skills and knowledge did you gain from the activities you completed with your buddy. (Examples: leadership, problem solving, teamwork skills) I've learned to be more patient

and learn how to overall more inclusive.

Lastly: I've learned teamwork, as you have to work with multiple and different people.

3. What did you enjoy the most so far about your experience in Best Buddies at Naples High School?

I've enjoyed getting to know the students, and getting to do the events and outside activities.

4. How likely are you to continue working for this program in the future? If you are a Senior, will you continue to volunteer in a similar group in college?

I want to involve myself into Special Olympics in the future, after graduation

5. Do you have any questions/suggestions in how we can improve this program at Naples High School.

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Best Buddies Club Survey      Naples High School

1. How satisfied are you with your Best Buddies experience so far as a student? On a scale of one to five, please rate your satisfaction.

1            2            3            4            5

2. What skills and knowledge did you gain from the activities you completed with your buddy. (Examples: leadership, problem solving, teamwork skills)

I learned how to be more  
relaxed and spread my attention out to more  
than one person.

3. What did you enjoy the most so far about your experience in Best Buddies at Naples High School?

I've enjoyed all the different  
personalities and friendships.

4. How likely are you to continue working for this program in the future? If you are a Senior, will you continue to volunteer in a similar group in college?

If there is a similar  
program at my college, I most likely will.

5. Do you have any questions/suggestions in how we can improve this program at Naples High School.

Make it more known, make more announcements  
about it and explain more about what  
it entails.

Best Buddies Club Survey      Naples High School

1. How satisfied are you with your Best Buddies experience so far as a student? On a scale of one to five, please rate your satisfaction.

1      2      3      4      5

2. What skills and knowledge did you gain from the activities you completed with your buddy. (Examples: leadership, problem solving, teamwork skills)

patients and meeting amazing students

3. What did you enjoy the most so far about your experience in Best Buddies at Naples High School?

meeting and being inspired by the sweetest kindest and best students who always have the best attitude and mindset.

4. How likely are you to continue working for this program in the future? If you are a Senior, will you continue to volunteer in a similar group in college?

yes, I would love to continue

5. Do you have any questions/suggestions in how we can improve this program at Naples High School.

N/A

1. How satisfied are you with your Best Buddies experience so far as a student? On a scale of one to five, please rate your satisfaction.

1

2

3

4

5

2. What skills and knowledge did you gain from the activities you completed with your buddy. (Examples: leadership, problem solving, teamwork skills)

I learned teamwork skills and how to work with someone different than me. I also built conversation skills and got to connect with a variety of people.

3. What did you enjoy the most so far about your experience in Best Buddies at Naples High School?

Getting to spend time with the ESE students on a casual level during lunch. Holiday party were especially fun.

4. How likely are you to continue working for this program in the future? If you are a Senior, will you continue to volunteer in a similar group in college?

Yes I plan to volunteer in a similar group in college to continue making these connections.

5. Do you have any questions/suggestions in how we can improve this program at Naples High School.

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Best Buddies Club Survey      Naples High School

1. How satisfied are you with your Best Buddies experience so far as a student? On a scale of one to five, please rate your satisfaction.

1            2            3            4            5

2. What skills and knowledge did you gain from the activities you completed with your buddy. (Examples: leadership, problem solving, teamwork skills)

I learned teamwork skills when  
it came to trying to achieve a specific goal.

3. What did you enjoy the most so far about your experience in Best Buddies at Naples High School?

Meeting new people / students I wouldn't be  
connected to otherwise!

4. How likely are you to continue working for this program in the future? If you are a Senior, will you continue to volunteer in a similar group in college?

In college I hope to  
join a similar group.

5. Do you have any questions/suggestions in how we can improve this program at Naples High School.

N/A

Best Buddies Club Survey      Naples High School

1. How satisfied are you with your Best Buddies experience so far as a student? On a scale of one to five, please rate your satisfaction.

1            2            3            4            5

2. What skills and knowledge did you gain from the activities you completed with your buddy. (Examples: leadership, problem solving, teamwork skills)

I learned the importance of teamwork

3. What did you enjoy the most so far about your experience in Best Buddies at Naples High School?

Connecting with students, and learning the value of friendship

4. How likely are you to continue working for this program in the future? If you are a Senior, will you continue to volunteer in a similar group in college?

I hope to continue to volunteer at a club that is similar

5. Do you have any questions/suggestions in how we can improve this program at Naples High School.

N/A



A Day in the Life  
of a Quadriplegic  
— WITH Renee Whisner  
VETERAN

# Certificate of appreciation to

Naples High School

Best Buddies



For participating in Renee Whisner's A Day in the Life of the Quadriplegics Mission: Christmas Cards for Veterans 2021  
Best Buddies filled out more than 200 cards for our Veterans in the state of Florida wishing them a Merry Christmas and  
Happy New Year.

Thousands of our veterans all over the world will not receive Christmas cards this year. It is with your help we are reaching out to as many  
veterans as possible and hope to do even more in the future.

CARING AND KIND

12 - 25 - 2021

DATE

*Renee Whisner*

RENEE WHISNER