

Iowa Department of Education
FY2026 Annual Narrative Report
Best Buddies in Iowa
July 1, 2025 - June 30, 2026

Project Name: Best Buddies in Iowa School Friendship Program

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Status of Contract Deliverables:

Total Number of Students Served: 1,755

Goal 1: Support **10** new or existing Best Buddies chapters at elementary, middle, or high schools in Iowa.

Status: In FY26, Best Buddies supported chapters at **56** schools in Iowa. Best Buddies opened **eight** new school programs at **three** elementary schools, **three** middle schools, and **two** high schools.

Goal 2: Support a minimum of **50** one-to-one matches between middle or high school students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and their typical peers.

Status: Best Buddies established a total of **364** one-to-one matches between students with and without IDD in our Middle School and High School programs.

Goal 3: Execute a minimum of **100** group activities in communities across the state that include students with IDD.

Status: Best Buddies hosted **361** group activities for students with and without IDD throughout the 2025-2026 school year in our elementary, middle and high school programs across the state.

Goal 4: Provide leadership training to **40** Best Buddies student leaders, including at least **10** students with IDD.

Status: This year we trained **seven** individuals, including **three** students with IDD, through **nine** Ambassador Academy trainings.

Project Impact Narrative

Best Buddies in Iowa made significant strides over the past year in fostering meaningful connections for individuals with IDD. Our school-based chapters supported students with and without disabilities across the state in building one-to-one friendships, engaging in group activities, and developing leadership skills.

In fiscal year 2026, Best Buddies supported a total of 56 elementary, middle, and high school chapters, including eight new chapters in the communities of Marion County, Shelby County and Story County. This expansion has allowed us to deepen our impact in both rural and urban areas.

Best Buddies created 364 one-to-one friendships between students with IDD and their typical peers, far exceeding our goal of 50 friendship matches. These friendships offered critical social support and built essential interpersonal skills for students with and without disabilities alike.

Leadership development also remained a core focus this year. On October 11, and October 18, 2025, Best Buddies provided local leadership training to 33 student leaders, including two students with IDD. These trainings provided students with the tools and resources to lead inclusive chapters and foster welcoming schools and communities.

Overall, Best Buddies exceeded all outlined goals and continued to grow a strong, inclusive culture in schools across the state. Through friendship and leadership

development, we are preparing the next generation to ensure that students with IDD are seen, valued, and fully included in their school communities.

Group Activities

Best Buddies chapters across the state hosted a total of **361** inclusive group activities during the school year, each designed to bring students with and without disabilities together in a spirit of fun, teamwork, and community. Highlights include:

- **Best Buddies at Urbandale High School Spotlited at Iowa Wolves Game:** On February 7, 2026, students from the Best Buddies chapter at Urbandale High School were spotlited at halftime for the Iowa Wolves during their “Leader of the Pack” half time show. Members had the opportunity to participate in the game by throwing T-shirts and hot dogs into the crowd.
- **Best Buddies at Valley High School’s annual “Valleytines” celebration:** On February 14, 2026, Best Buddies members celebrated Valentine’s Day with a cake walk, cornhole tournament, cookie decorating, a scavenger hunt, photo booth, and other printed games such as word searches, crossword puzzles, and coloring sheets.
- **Roosevelt High School’s Celebration of Inclusion:** On March 5, 2026, the school held a friendly basketball game between the members of Best Buddies and the Roosevelt High School Varsity basketball team.
- **Johnston High School Kickball Event:** On April 18, the Best Buddies chapters at Ankeny High School and Johnston High School got together to play kickball, enjoy great weather and exercise together.

Survey results and relevant data

Of the **47** annual survey responses we received from participants, **45** reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the Best Buddies friendship program at their school, resulting in a 95 percent satisfaction rate with our in school programming.