

[Login](#) | [Register](#)


Computer issues?
Rollover to see how we can help!

PROTech

[Today's paper](#) | [eEdition](#) | [Subscribe](#)[The Truth-O-Meter](#)[Latest print edition](#)[Classifieds](#)[BooCoo Auctions](#)[Press Releases](#)[Jobs](#)[Real Estate](#)[Cars](#)[Shop](#)[Advertise](#)[Home](#)[News](#)[Politics](#)[Opinion](#)[Sports](#)[Things to Do](#)[Money](#)[Features](#)[Blogs](#)[Weather](#)[Traffic](#)[Site map](#)[Search](#)[Site](#)[Web](#)[Archives - back to 1987](#)[Google Newspaper Archive - back to 1901](#)powered by **Google****/PRlink PAID PRESS RELEASES**

als September Calendar of Events | BayCare Health System Offers Weight Loss Information Sessions Throughout the T

[VIEW ITEMS](#) | [POST](#)**PolitiFact.com**

The truth about politics

**Most emailed**

- [Sports on TV/Radio](#)
- [Tampa Bay's economic 'recovery' among weakest in the country](#)
- [Twin 2-year-old boys killed in Brandon house fire](#)
- [Edelweiss Air to begin nonstop service between Tampa International Airport and Switzerland in May](#)
- [Police: Mom didn't take disabled teen to necessary doctor appointments](#)

Popular

- [The girl in the window](#)
- [Luxury floating resort to open off Clearwater](#)
- [Pasco couple fear losing home to foreclosure for paying mortgage too early](#)
- [Plan B for Obama family vacation](#)
- [Teen accused of school bomb threat at Freedom High School in Tampa](#)

Education: K - 12

- [Principal's crusade: Save lives](#)
- [North of Tampa school notes](#)
- [Video conference classes bring global issues to Freedom High students](#)
- [Principal of Tampa's Bryant Elementary School honored for fundraising efforts](#)
- [Deputies catch 15-year-old boy who escaped arrest at Rogers Middle](#)

Coleman Middle retains Best Buddies as a club, though one mom wishes it was still a class

By Aubrey Whelan, Times Staff Writer
In Print: Friday, September 9, 2011

Hannah Wise and Ari Weitzman read a book at Ari's house recently. "When you make a friend, you just don't stop hanging out with them," Hannah said. "He makes me smile."



[EDWARD LINSMIER | Times]

CULBREATH HEIGHTS

Coleman Middle School's Best Buddies program is the reason Ari Weitzman has friends.

The 12-year-old seventh-grader is one of just 100 people in the world with the chromosomal disorder Ring 14, which manifests as a combination of autism, cerebral palsy and Down syndrome, said his mother, Silvia Weitzman.

Before he started middle school, a neurologist told Weitzman that Ari needed to interact with "typical kids" more often. So she enrolled him at Coleman, which offered Best Buddies as an elective. The program was created by a national organization that pairs disabled kids with regular-ed "best buddies."

Through Best Buddies, Weitzman said, Ari gained friends and had fewer episodes of bad behavior.

But she worries that that may change now. Coleman decided to offer the program as an extracurricular club this year, rather than a class during the school day. While four other middle schools and 15 high schools in the area offer variations on the Best Buddies program, Coleman was the only one to

[Print](#) [Email](#) [Post](#) [Republish](#)

Story Tools
 [Comments \(1\)](#) [Contact the editor](#)
 [Email Newsletters](#)

Social Bookmarking [ShareThis](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

Subscribe to the Times

Click here for daily delivery of the St. Petersburg Times.

Want More Breaking News?**Scoop**Another exclusive
[@tampabay.com](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

School

offer it as an elective.

"In order to have Best Buddies (as an elective) we needed a certain amount of kids in the program," said Coleman principal Mike Hoskinson. "We were waiting to see if enough kids showed up, and they didn't, unfortunately."

Hoskinson says the school wouldn't be opposed to continuing the program as an elective in the future. The class would cost about \$60,000, including a teacher's salary and other expenses.

This year, "the numbers don't justify (the expense)," Hoskinson said. "If each school did that, it would be a lot of money across the district when we don't have it."

• • •

Last school year, Ari quickly took to the program, Weitzman said, spending two class periods a week with his buddy. For the first time in his life, peers greeted Ari in the hallway and hung out with him on weekends. His verbal skills improved. He grew more social, Weitzman said.

"It's almost like therapy for him," she said.

Hannah Wise was Ari's "best buddy" last school year.

"I went from seeing him three times a week to only seeing him for a minute," said the eighth-grader, who sometimes visits with him on the weekends and stops by in between classes. "He doesn't really understand that we're not going to see each other as much."

Not everyone is concerned with the program's changes. Coleman's Best Buddies had been an elective for just a year, and Tish West, whose daughter Caroline participated in the program for three years, said she found the club just as valuable.

"The truth is, I want kids involved in it who want to be there, who have the heart for being around our kids," she said. "Whether it's an elective or a club doesn't matter to me as long as the outcome is the same."

Weitzman isn't so sure.

"(Ari) very much models other kids. That's why we wanted him to be around them," she said. "That class provided that interaction," though Ari did join the after-school club. "He's become very independent."

Cindy Salas, Best Buddies' area director for Tampa Bay, said the organization hadn't heard last week that Coleman returned the program to club status, but is interested in helping the school transition.

"Even though it won't be a class, we can make sure they're operating effectively as a chapter," she said. "I think they can do that with a lot of our support."

Hoskinson said the school will strive to ensure that the program continues to attract and engage students.

"You have to find other ways to do it outside of school. We have a really good community here and student base," he said. "You just have to think outside the box."

[Last modified: Sep 08, 2011 04:30 AM]



[Click here for reuse options!](#)

Copyright 2011 St. Petersburg Times

ADVERTISEMENT

[Previous Photo](#)

[Next Photo](#)



A pair who met in the Best Buddies elective last school year spend a Sunday afternoon at Ari Weitzman's house.

Featured



The Freedom
Riders ride
again



Behind the
scenes at
Cheetah Hunt



Roving gators
put police in
tricky spots

Join the discussion: Click to view comments, add yours



© 2011 · All Rights Reserved · St. Petersburg Times
490 First Avenue South • St. Petersburg, FL 33701 • 727-893-8111
[Contact Us](#) | [Join Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe to the St. Petersburg Times](#) | [RSS](#)
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Standard of Accuracy](#) | [Terms, Conditions & Copyright](#)