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

By Aubrey Whelan, Times Staff Writer
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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."



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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

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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."

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

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