

# IT'S NOT ABOUT THE DRUMMING: INCORPORATING DRUM CIRCLE ACTIVITIES WITH YOUR CAMPUS SPECIAL NEEDS DEPARTMENT

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It's not about the drumming. That's one of the many lessons learned starting a public school drum circle club for students with special needs. Yes, we have a great time, but it's not about that. Yes, we get exposure to different playing styles and world instruments, but it's not about that either. It's about using a steady beat to help calm an anxious child. It's about using a rhythm game to learn how to introduce yourself. No longer limited to the counter culture, drum circle activities and treatments have proven quite effective in creating an atmosphere for social and motor skill development, and an opportunity for your typical students to perform a meaningful community service!

The following information on establishing a drum circle program are based on my personal experiences. I hope this article can help alleviate some of the trial-and-error concerns you may have of starting your own!

## The Ideal Scenario

You may be in a situation where buying \$700 worth of hand drums is but a PTA fundraiser away. Awesome, buckle up for a fun ride on Santa's sleigh because it's Christmas! However you could just as easily be in a situation where you're provided the utmost moral support with a smile, and that's about it. In that case, hey, beans inside a toilet roll tube sound pretty awesome when accompanying a Folgers Coffee tin with the lid still on. On my campus the band department, special needs department, and PTA all pitched in \$200 allowing us to buy a CRAZY amount of small hand drums, shakers (oh so many shakers), and frame drums.

The ideal scenario is a myth. There is no ideal scenario. If you have it in your heart to serve others in a unique way, you should absolutely explore this option.



## Do Your Research

Before taking action, make sure you know what you are getting yourself into! I was fortunate to have a long conversation with Mr. John Fitzgerald of the Remo Corporation while researching equipment options. He opened my eyes quite a bit to how different a drum circle is compared to standard public music education. Drum circles connect you in a completely different way than rehearsing an ensemble or teaching an instrument. It's not about proper slap techniques, it's about the smile on the face! A quick google search on "drum circles", "drumming with special needs", "benefits of drum therapy" and other similar queries will provide countless references for you to make an informed decision. I recommend searching *Developmental Community Music*, *Village Music Circles*, and *Remo HealthRhythms*. These sites provided me a comprehensive idea of the most widely used approaches.

Drum circles are not for everybody. It takes a unique kind of person, one who can turn off the competitive educator within and create a unique experience having nothing to do with technical accomplishment. Do your research, talk to the community, and decide if it's really for you.

## Your Special Needs Departments

The professional and paraprofessional staff of your special needs department are the unsung heroes of the campus! Follow their schedule for even one day and you will never look at your job the same again. They are the only ones on campus that are qualified to decide who can participate in your drum circle, and what activities will work.

You will be amazed at all the different needs of each individual kiddo, ranging from needing the occasional helping hand to needing to be fed. *Present the drum circle idea in a way that reassures the staff this will not add to their already full plate!* Our department worked out a paraprofessional rotation and it works great. The most important aspects to agree upon will be the number of kids who can participate, how often the drum circles should occur, what teachers will attend, and most importantly what activities would be most effective for the group.

If you are unfamiliar with the world of special needs, it very well could be too much to handle at first. You might even get emotional after seeing what their world is like. It's ok, let yourself! That just means you'll be really good at this!

## Your Principal

Hands down, your Principal will be your strongest ally in making your drum circle a reality! You aren't just scheduling an after school sectional here, this will involve several different departments within your school and most likely at the district level. Definitely not waters to wade alone! Schedule a convenient time to meet with your principal and introduce the idea. They will no doubt love it but have a ton of questions on how to make it work. The better you did your research, the better this meeting will go!

Let's be honest, what principal would not want this happening on their campus? The kids get a great opportunity, and you both look good in the community. It's a win-win!

### Have an Equipment Budget Ready

During your research, be sure to include "hand drum reviews", "drum circle training sessions", or visit a few online merchants. I recommend building a spreadsheet similar to this one:

Item	Brand	Qty	Cost	Subtotals
Kids Konga	Remo	3	\$25.00	\$75.00
Kids Djembe	Remo	3	\$60.00	\$180.00
Frame Drum set of 5	Remo	1	\$59.99	\$59.99
PASIC Drum Circle Session	PASIC	1	\$75.00	\$75.00
			<b>Total</b>	<b>USD 389.99</b>

Using the formula functions to do the math for you (i.e. entering `=sum(c2*d2)` into cell e2), play around with the numbers seeing what kind of group you can outfit. *How much to get three of each kind of Remo kids drums, one set of frame drums, and four tambourines (type, type, type, type). WOAH! How about two of each, no frame drums, and only 2 tambourines (type, type, type, type). Sweet, we can swing that. Wait, can't forget the samba whistle. Kids dig the samba whistle...*

Odds are your administration is crazy busy and completely in the dark when it comes to drum pricing, then knowing you have a few financial scenarios ready upon request will help expedite the process should they want to move forward.

### No Budget, No Problem

The chances are high you will be asked to prove viability before investing money into it. This is not a reflection of lack of faith in you, but a concern of financial risk. Depending on the size of the groups (which are typically small), starting with what you have is definitely doable! That triangle you haven't used since you upgraded to the Abel? Put it to good use, it doesn't even need a clip. The snare in the bottom of the cabinet with no bottom head? Bottom head schmottom schmead, bust it out!



Despite the occasional dust up over property taxes, you can normally find plenty of parents willing to help either donating money, coffee cans, or their time to help you build something. Plus you never know what hidden treasure a quick “homemade instruments” google search will turn up! The more involved the community is, the more attached they will become.

### **Set Your Schedule**

Enter the labyrinth. Your special needs department will have a much more delicate schedule than you will. Don't expect the schedule you start with to be the one you end with, and don't expect to ever have 100% attendance! Sometimes the wrong number of ice cubes can be all it takes to ruin a kids day. Just roll with the punches and have fun with whoever shows up! The easiest option would be to send the special needs department a schedule of all the times you are available and let them choose a primary and make up time. We are able to hold our sessions during an advisory period at the end of the day, once every other week.

Don't expect any type of performance opportunity, that's not what it's about. But if you're comfortable leading them through a performance, I suggest a version of your school song with a drum beat! We always open the school talent show with a drum circle version of our school alma mater.

### **Choose Your Activity**

If you're looking for drum-circle-in-a-box I highly recommend the works of Kalani, including *The Amazing Jamnasium*, available at amazon.com. The role of the facilitator is clearly explained, the activities are already laid out, and several fun playalong tracks are included. Meet with your special needs team to decide which types of activities will be most appropriate. Some involve hitting a drum, some take a call-and-response form, some don't involve drums at all but talking, dancing, or singing.

Here are a few of the simpler ones that our kiddos prefer:

-Free play (icebreaker): We start a playback track on the speakers, either from the Kalani collection or one I put together in Logic (music sampling software), and the kids are free to play whatever they want. About four minutes tends to be the right amount of time for the more timid kids to see how much fun everyone is having and join in!

-Rumble Fingers (works on focus): Kids roll on the drum quietly with me controlling their volume with my “magic fingers” from the center of the circle. When I raise my hands, they get louder and vice versa. If I point to a certain person, we do the wave around the room. After a few times, I call for a volunteer and pass them the magic to control the group.

-Where’s Perry? (works on communication): This is pretty much “hot and cold” but with rolling on a drum. We have our “detective” wait outside the room so we can hide our little Perry doll (from Phineas and Ferb). We yell “WHERE’S PERRY!?!” when we’re ready, then guide the detective to Perry by playing louder when they’re closer and quieter when they’re farther away.

-Who wants a parade! (works on following instructions and step size): Self explanatory. Come up with a simple “1,2,3” beat and lead everyone through a short parade route. We sometimes mix it up and do small steps when we’re soft and large steps when we’re loud. Our administration love it when we come through the head office!

We tried them without our Drum Buddies first (more on this later), so our typical kids could lead by example. A little investment on your end will help you get off your feet smoothly. If you have access to a music therapist in your district, they could surely get you started!

## **Design Your Own**

Most of the activities available online or through publication are familiar, repetitive, and predictable which make them easy to learn and to imitate. Just like no single educator can claim to have created *8 on a Hand*, there’s nothing stopping you from creating your own after you’ve tried a few activities. *Where’s Perry?* was originally known as *Where’s Froggy?* in Kalani’s book. If you’re looking for some new playalong tracks, Mac users have access to a huge library of drum beats you can create at whatever tempo and length you want in GarageBand. On the topic of playalong tracks, don’t overuse them like I used to!

Be prepared for complete success and total failure. Some activities will be a huge hit one week and a dud the next. Some will crash and burn one week and steal the show the next. Just go with it!

## **Choose your Drum Buddies**

Your typical student volunteers, or Drum Buddies, will make the experience so very special for so many people. By far the most complimentary emails I receive from parents is about their child with disabilities having the opportunity to mix in with our typical population. “You make him feel like just another kid” can be a powerful thing to read!

While the obvious choice would be to start with your percussion section, they won't always be available or even an optimal choice. Plenty of ways to work your side of the roster. Band kids, fine arts kids, let the administration choose, etc. Be sure they understand it is not about them, it's about serving their community. If a kiddo with special needs is eyeing their drum, they should give it to them with a smile and go grab something else! The ones that simply don't get what it's about will reveal themselves quickly and lose interest in coming. They're the ones who think it's about the drumming! After a few sessions you'll have a regular crew of kids that understand it's not about them and will be there every time.

### **Develop A Relationship**

These could be the most important relationships you ever form, make each one of them special. Music may not have been an option to some of these families before, they will not be familiar with the activity and could initially not buy into it. The closer they feel to you and the more passion they can see in you, the more comfortable they will be asking questions and eventually buying into the idea.

### **Your Role As The Facilitator**

The facilitator is who leads the group through the experience. See yourself as more of a guide than an instructor. You won't be explaining proper technique or correcting ensemble tears. You'll simply show them what to do, get them going, and then get out of the way! Arthur Hull (Village Music Circles) and Kalani (Developmental Community Music) lay down clear roles of the facilitator on their websites and in their publications.



While you are there to provide guidance and energy for the group, one must be mindful to not inhibit free play. This was by far the hardest adjustment for me, coming from a world of tick sheets and scale passoffs! It can be so refreshing to step out of the "my kids must have this technique by this time" mentality and live in the moment if only for thirty minutes. When I'm in the middle of the circle and passing my magic fingers, I feel more like I'm goofing off than actually working!

## The Perks

There's nothing wrong with recognizing the personal benefits of offering your time for this experience! First and foremost, talk about a behavior incentive! Our special needs department has a chart with the days of the week and a little velcro drum with each kiddos name on it. If they misbehave or don't follow instructions they don't move their drum forward and could lose the privilege for that week. Same with our typical student drum buddies. They must be passing all their classes and have high conduct marks, and their advisory teacher can keep them from coming at anytime should they fall behind on their work or misbehave. I always end the sessions with *"I really had a lot of fun drumming with you guys today, be sure to do all your work and listen to your teachers so you can come back. I'm gonna miss you if I don't get to see you next week!"*.

Also, here in Texas for professional appraisal the highest scores in certain categories require participation on committees and projects that benefit the whole campus or district. This is not always easy to achieve, especially within the parameters of an electives teacher. When presented to your administration with facts and data, these activities may help you qualify for those highest scores!

## Be a Means to an End

Just because you're playing golf with a disability does not make it golf therapy. Keep it in perspective, and when you are presented the opportunity to work with a music therapist be sure to take it. Visit the American Music Therapist Association website for any registered music therapists in the area. While you may be able to provide the service for free, perhaps raise money to bring in an actual music therapist, or consult your district administration. You may be surprised how many school districts out there already have one on staff!

It's not about the drumming. It's not about the performance. It's about the experience. Just have a good time connecting with your students, and provide an opportunity like no other. You're building compassion, empathy, and service, qualities highly sought after as our children enter the emerging global market. To allow your percussionists the opportunity to use their skills in this way is a gift well appreciated by parents and will serve their child well into their chosen profession. I wish you the best of luck! •

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