

Catholic Schools, Where *All Are Welcome*

Four years ago our two oldest daughters started kindergarten at Blessed Sacrament Catholic Elementary School in Quincy, IL. We thought we were bringing inclusion to Blessed Sacrament. We were wrong.

We have three daughters, RayLee (9), Sophie (8) and Mila (7). RayLee and Mila both have Down syndrome. Mila, adopted, also has Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), related to being institutionalized in Ukraine the first, almost, three years of her life, and ADHD/spectrum-like needs and behaviors. So, while Blessed Sacrament did not have students that displayed one of the traits of their disability on their face, like Down syndrome does, they did already have students with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, specific learning disorders, RAD, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), twice exceptional (gifted AND learning issues), anxiety and a number of undiagnosed mental health and learning disabilities.

As with most Catholic schools, they were highly limited on the resources they had to address these many needs, and, in fact, in most cases, had not labeled the child, were simply working to do the best they possibly could for each student. Now, while I would never say that caring and wanting each child to be successful is ALL you need, I will say that Blessed Sacrament was the proof that faith, caring and a willingness to think outside the box are a good start.

We were so impressed by the school's demonstration of our faith in action, that my husband converted to Catholicism, left his public school position as a principal/special education coordinator and accepted the role of fifth-grade teacher at Blessed Sacrament. In addition, we started a local affiliate program of the FIRE Foundation based out of Kansas City – the FIRE Foundation of Central Illinois – to start raising funds to support our school and eventually our diocese's efforts to include all students.



Forty years ago this year, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) released a statement on the leadership role we as Catholics and our Catholic schools must take in the inclusion and education of all students together. We have made some progress in 40 years. Some. Yet, if you ask most people if Catholic schools accept students with disabilities, they will likely tell you no, and they will apologetically point to the lack of resources to educate “those kids.”

While we are blessed with a Catholic school and parish that has chosen to include all students to the best of their ability, they are still financially and resources limited. This makes the possibility that our daughters, and students like them, could be asked to leave or never admitted an ever-present possibility. The weight of this fear is greater than I can capture in the words I write here. If you've experienced your child being left out, I want you to consider what it is like to carry that feeling every single day, and the one leaving them out is their Catholic school, their church. The place we look to for guidance on how we can better serve the “least of these” is, in many cases, not. It is a fear and heartache that I pray will end for all parents as our Catholic schools work to live our faith through the full welcoming and inclusion of

all students. It is going to take all of us working together.

Through the combined efforts of NCEA, the USCCB, our Catholic dioceses, parishes and schools, as well as the prayers and work of parents like you and I, we can make inclusion the norm, rather than the exception. Please find our suggestions for how you, as a parent, can help your school's efforts:



- Educate yourself on your state's proportionate share funding process. Contact your state board of education to understand what resources are available via the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to support your child's educational needs. Then, work with your school to ensure it is getting the federally mandated resources and funding to support your child in that Catholic school. Our Catholic school leaders may not fully understand the many resources that are federally mandated and funded for the support of students with disabilities, especially if the school has not included many students previously. You can be a tremendous resource in this area.
- Be open and honest about your child's needs so you and the school can partner for his or her success.
- Share what works. If you find a method or tool that works at home, tell the teacher and help get it for your school, if you can.
- Attend conferences and share the resources with your child's teacher and school.
- Look for conferences that school staff might attend. If possible, help with offsetting the cost to attend, or help find resources to fund their attendance.
- Write a grant or ask your employer if there are funding opportunities that would be available to support your child's school or the education of students with disabilities.
- Volunteer. Volunteer. Then volunteer some more. The more you can take off of the school or teacher's plate, the more time and resources they have for all students.
- The relationship between you and the school must be a partnership. Be prepared to help in any way possible to add to your child's education.
- Stop expecting perfection. This is for parents and teachers. I often ask educators to list how many of their days

are perfect. Wait! None you say? Not a single day or lesson plan was perfect? Inclusion, like everyday in education, is a work in progress. You try this accommodation or modification and if it works, great! If not, we try again. This belief that we cannot implement inclusion until we have a perfect plan or every feasible resource in place is setting our schools up to fail, or to never truly get started.

- Tell everyone about the great things your child's school is doing. You are one of the school's best recruiting and funding assets.
- Acquire information about your child's disability to share with the school. Educators and leaders may want to share facts with other educators, leaders, parents and students.

By Jill and Chris Reffett

