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[Parish News](#)
[World](#)
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[Schools](#)
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When Catholic schools offer inclusion programs, teachers and parents say all students benefit

By Kelly Seegers, Catholic Standard | Monday, August 29, 2016 8:58 AM

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When Our Lady of Mercy School in Potomac began their inclusion program in 1993, it had only one student, and one teacher who was hired specifically to serve that child's needs. According to Eileen Grams, the current director of the school's Inclusion Program, it was the first program in the Archdiocese of Washington to offer students with special needs an alternate curriculum.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CATHOLIC COALITION FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION Breanna Vitak and Erin Hicks, friends and fellow students at the Academy of the Holy Cross in Kensington, attend the Catholic Coalition for Special Education's fall festival last year. The academy's Moreau Options program serves Vitak and other students with Down syndrome.

One day, Msgr. John Enzler, who was the pastor of Our Lady of Mercy at the time, heard from a family who had sent their children to Mercy before, had moved away, and was now returning to the parish. This family now had a child with Down syndrome, and they asked Msgr. Enzler if Mercy would be able to accommodate their child.

"They wanted for that child what the other children had had—a Mercy education," said Grams, who has been at Our Lady of Mercy School for nearly 20 years.

Msgr. Enzler worked with Sister Virginia Pfau, an Immaculate Heart of Mary sister who was then the school's principal, and did something that was at the time unprecedented. They hired their first inclusion teacher, Angela Frick, in what Grams called, "a leap of faith," with the school saying "we are going to do what is necessary to make this work for this family."

"[Msgr. Enzler] really stepped out and made a commitment" at a time when other people weren't doing so, said Grams. "The education was a pretty traditional general education model at the time, so it was a big deal back in the day." The new program allowed this child, and many children afterward, to be able to attend the same school as the rest of the family.

"The Catholic school uniform means something," said Father Bill Byrne, the current pastor of Our Lady of Mercy. "It means that we educate the whole person, and it is wonderful to be able to open that opportunity up in our small way to boys and girls of all different abilities."

Now, about 30 students at Mercy receive varying levels of academic support every year, ranging from extended time on standardized tests to a completely modified curriculum. In addition to Grams, the program currently has two other full-time teachers: Karen Fogleman, who is a certified speech and language pathologist, and Allison Beatley, who has a master's degree in special education.

For students such as Chloe Muller, a rising third grader at Our Lady of Mercy with developmental delays and neurologic and physical impairments, the one-on-one instruction that the Mercy Inclusion Program offers is crucial to her growth. While some students only receive help on upcoming assignments during the period when others are taking Spanish, Chloe receives an entirely modified math, reading, and writing curriculum through separate one-on-one instruction.

Her parents, Jordan and Meg Muller, who are parishioners of Blessed Sacrament in Washington, evaluated whether to send Chloe to a school specifically for students with special needs or to send her to Our Lady of Mercy, but it didn't take long before they decided that Mercy was the best fit for their daughter.

"As soon as we met Eileen and talked to her the first time we were very impressed by her and her description of their approach," Jordan Muller said, "We appreciated that the school had a long-standing focus on special needs and inclusion."

The Mullers said they also valued the fact that Chloe would still be able to be a part of a class with typically developing peers. Chloe joins her classmates for subjects such as religion or social studies in order to develop social skills and learn how to follow instructions. Sometimes the inclusion teachers will choose to join Chloe during those subjects to provide extra support.

Meg Muller said that she thinks Chloe's interactions with her classmates over the years have helped her come out of her shell.

"The kids in her class have really been quite wonderful with her," said Meg Muller. "They have been together with her now for three years in a row and they have just been so patient and accepting of her."

The Mullers said that the overall Mercy community has also been very supportive of Chloe. The Mullers participated in Children National Health System's annual "Race for Every Child" in order to raise money to support Chloe and other children with the same genetic disease. In addition to donating money, some families from Mercy brought their children to run in the race alongside Chloe.

Both Grams and the Mullers said they are also grateful for the support that comes from the current principal, Debbie Thomas, and Father Byrne.

Father Byrne said he is proud to be the pastor of a parish that sees having an inclusion program "as a value and a gift."

"When we talk about the Body of Christ, we have to recognize that we don't completely reflect Christ unless all the members are there," said Father Byrne. "The inclusion program is a wonderful gift to our school because it helps us to understand the full richness of the Body of Christ."

Since Mercy's Inclusion Program began, other schools in the archdiocese have begun similar programs, largely with the help of the Catholic Coalition for Special Education (CCSE), which was founded by Francesca Pellegrino in 2004.

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Pellegrino, who is a parishioner of Blessed Sacrament, had a difficult time trying to find a Catholic school that would accommodate her son, Alex, who has special needs. He was not getting any faith formation in his public school, and she wanted him to be able to be prepared to receive the sacraments, such as First Holy Communion.

She soon learned that she was not the only one who had this desire for her child with special needs to receive faith formation, and she was also not the only one who was having difficulty enrolling her child in a Catholic school, as the few programs that were available at that time were already at their capacity.

"The whole thing kind of prompted a crisis of faith in me, but I quickly realized that I couldn't just stay angry at the world or angry at God... I decided to see if I could bring about some change in my parishes and in my Catholic schools," Pellegrino said.

And that is exactly what she did. After first establishing the disAbilities ministry at Blessed Sacrament, which seeks to integrate people with disabilities into parish life, Pellegrino went on to found CCSE. Since its founding, CCSE has given grants to 26 schools in seven counties in Maryland, as they serve both the Archdiocese of Washington and the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

"I think inclusion is really very important in Catholic schools because it speaks to our Catholic identity and it speaks to our Church's life mission," Pellegrino said. "Because we are one body in Christ and we should all be welcomed equally at the Lords table."

While there is still more work to be done, such as creating inclusion programs in more Catholic high schools to accommodate the students who are being served in the Catholic elementary and middle schools, Pellegrino is excited to hear that more and more families are able to be accommodated in parish schools. She has even heard of a few parishes who have reached out to families who are pregnant with a child who will have special needs to say, "When your child is ready to go to school, we will be ready to accommodate them."

"It is manna from heaven for parents to hear that," she said.

In order to support inclusion programs in schools, the archdiocese helps facilitate regular gatherings of resource teachers. Maggie Hubbard, the director for Special Education for the archdiocese, said this allows teachers to have a network of people whom they can call if they ever have difficulty, which is important given how much both students and parents rely on the teachers.

"Those teachers know Chloe as well as we do, if not better, in terms of her daily routine and speech ability and language abilities... We rely on them to tell us what is working, how she has been from week to week," Jordan Muller said.

Hubbard began as a first grade teacher at St. Mary of the Mills, where one year she had a student with Down syndrome. She believes she became a better teacher as a result, and the experience of having that student in her class inspired her to get her master's degree in Special Education and continue to serve students with special needs.

"That was definitely life changing. ... Not only did he help me grow as a teacher, but he brought a lot to the class, his classmates learned a lot from him," Hubbard said.

This is just one example of what Pellegrino says is the best-kept secret of inclusion programs: that they don't only benefit students with disabilities.

"They really have an impact on the entire school community," she said. "All the students really benefit academically, spiritually and socially."

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