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These students with special needs have a request of Pope Francis

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Washington D.C., Aug 26, 2015 / 06:21 am (CNA).- A group representing Catholic students with intellectual disabilities is hoping a U.S. visit from Pope Francis could spark nothing less than a renaissance in Catholic education.

“We hope that Pope Francis will further open up the doors with the very welcoming message that he seems to convey to people that are on the margins of society, often neglected or overlooked,” said Francesca Pellegrino, founder of the Catholic Coalition for Special Education, a Maryland-based group that helps local Catholic schools accommodate students with intellectual disabilities.

Pope Francis has already demonstrated his care for students with special needs, she added. For instance, his February Google Hangout with students who have disabilities showed that he is “focusing on this [issue] more than folks have in the past.”

In advance of the papal visit to the U.S. capital, the coalition produced a welcome video of students showing iconic Washington, D.C. landmarks like the Lincoln Memorial and the White House. The video’s title is “We all have a treasure inside!” and it is taken from Pope Francis’ Feb. 5 Google Hangout, where he told children with special needs that when “we share our own treasure with others, it multiplies along with the treasures that



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come from the others we meet.”

The official schedule for the Pope’s U.S. visit does not include a meeting with students with disabilities. However, advocates remain hopeful that his previous words will inspire Catholic leaders to prioritize schooling options for students with intellectual disabilities.

Already, the coalition has provided \$800,000 in seed grants to 26 area schools to help them better accommodate students with special needs. This assistance helps with the hiring of specialized teachers, special education training for existing teachers, and the purchasing of any special equipment these students might need in the classroom.

The coalition’s area of operation runs from St. Mary’s County in Southern Maryland up north to the town of Emmitsburg on the Pennsylvania border – where St. Elizabeth Ann Seton once established a boarding school for young girls in the early 1800s. Although the coalition is having a regional impact, demand for accommodations at Catholic schools is still outpacing provision for students with special needs.

Parents in the Washington, D.C. area have very few Catholic schooling options for their children with intellectual disabilities, particularly in Catholic high schools. Children from the same family end up attending separate schools because of the lack of options.

John Paul Lavallee is an exception to this trend, though. He will be attending Bishop McNamara Catholic High School in Forestville, Md. because the coalition provided the school with a grant for his education, and the school has a program to accommodate his needs. John Paul has autism.

The St. Joseph’s Program which he will be participating in offers “extra support that is tailored to each student’s needs so that they can keep up in the classroom,” his father Fernand explained.

This fall, John Paul will study Algebra I, English, History of American Law, and Physics, among other classes, and he wants to take a web design class. Outside of class he enjoys doing what many other teenagers would – going to the gym, playing with his dog, and hanging out with siblings.

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He’s also a gifted writer – his pro-life essay won first prize at both the Maryland Right to Life essay competition and the National Right to Life competition. He hopes to see Pope Francis when he visits D.C., and his family might travel up the east coast to the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia.

When he was younger, John Paul’s parents embarked on an intensive search just to find a Catholic grade school that could accommodate his

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educational needs. He wanted to attend the same school his older brother and sister went to, but the school couldn't take him – a “heartbreaker, for us as a family, for John Paul,” his father recalled.

At first, no other elementary school could accommodate him, but his parents were “thrilled” when he was accepted at Our Lady of Lourdes School in Bethesda, Md.

When he was ready for high school, they had to search again for a school that could accommodate him.

“And sadly, in the Maryland-D.C. area, really MacNamara was the only choice for a boy,” Fernand Lavalée told CNA. “There were some schools in Northern Virginia that we had looked at. This program seemed to be the best all-around fit.”

When he attends McNamara as a freshman this fall, John Paul will not be the first student at the school who has been sponsored by CCSE. But the coalition still had to provide grant money to expand the school's existing program to accept him.

Why are there so few Catholic schools that can accommodate students with autism, Down syndrome and other challenges? Many schools just feel they don't have the necessary resources or knowledge, said Pellegrino.

“It's not easy,” she admitted, “a lot of it is about fear of trying something that's not been tried before, that's a little bit different.”

“And just as we, as parents, have to stretch to be the best parents that we can be for our children with disabilities, so too we're sort of calling on the schools to stretch a little bit to be the best that they can be for their students,” she continued.

“I think that's what God calls all of us to be. He sent us these challenges to be better human beings.”

Theresa Brogan, a freshman at the Academy of the Holy Cross in Kensington, Md., is another one of the students welcoming Pope Francis to D.C. in the coalition's video. She's a member of the Best Buddies Club and likes hip-hop dancing, acting, baking cookies, and playing sports.

She says she will try to attend the canonization Mass for Bl. Junipero Serra when Pope Francis visits Washington, D.C. “You will love it here,” she wishes to tell the Pope.

Theresa was welcomed at St. John the Evangelist School in Silver Spring, Md., a “wonderful message” that is sadly “not often the case,” Pellegrino said. The former head of the school, the late Sister Kathleen Lannak, IHM, was a long-time supporter of accommodating students with intellectual disabilities.

“One of the first times I met her, the conversation had turned to how expensive it might be to have a program that's all-inclusive,” Fernand Lavalée recalled of Sister Kathleen. “And she seemed almost insulted that



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the conversation would turn to that. She said 'this is absolutely the right thing to do, and God will provide a way.' She said it with such faith and such conviction."

"That was the right attitude. And she made it happen here."

Some schools – like St. John's – are already trying to accommodate students with disabilities, even at no extra expense to the parents. And some of those schools are in the poorest communities in the area, Lavallee noted.

"I think there's a presumption as well that it can only be done in the wealthier parishes, which is not necessarily the case in practicality," said Melissa Sloan, whose first-grade son, Eddie, has Down syndrome and attends St. John the Evangelist school in Silver Spring, Md.

"(E)ven without a lot of money and with the help of organizations like CCSE, it can actually be done in parishes that are not the most wealthy," she added.

Ultimately, there is something very Christian about schools not separating students based on their perceived abilities but educating them all together, parents say.

To encounter others with certain abilities and disabilities is simply Christian realism, and how we're supposed to live, said Lavallee.

"To give people a notion that you only deal with high-achieving people or highly-academic people, that that's the world you're going to participate in, it's a disservice to everyone."

In Catholic education, there is a notion of helping each person reach their potential to serve the Lord, Pellegrino said. Yet "in some instances, children with disabilities are not presumed to be competent."

"People will say 'oh, well he can't do this, he can't do that, he can't do the other thing.' Well tell me about what he can do, because we all have gifts," she stressed.

Another benefit of children attending a Catholic school is that they can evangelize their parents. "As parents of kids in Catholic school, we're still growing in our own faith," acknowledged Eddie Sloan's father, Neil. "Being able to go to a Catholic school as a family keeps us more involved in the parish."

Ultimately, CCSE would like more of a national voice, especially at the U.S. Bishops' Conference. Pellegrino hopes they will get an invite from the bishops and the National Catholic Education Association to meet and talk about "how we can really work on all of this together."

There is currently "no central governing authority on Catholic special education issues," she added.

"I would also hope that more of the shepherds, the bishops take the opportunity to look closer and see this part of their flock and what they can do, and promote the inclusion," she added. When Pope Francis has



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pleaded in the past for priests and bishops to “smell like the sheep,” she said, “these are the sheep.”

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