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Catholic Coalition for Special Education Breaks Its Own Fundraising Record at Annual Spring Benefit

"Whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me"

(Matthew 18:5)

Special Olympics Head Tim Shriver Exhorts Gala Crowd to Live Gospel

The Catholic Coalition for Special Education has held its seventh and most successful Spring Benefit at a Bethesda country club to raise funds to expand special education opportunities at Catholic schools in metropolitan Washington.

The 2012 benefit raised \$200,000 in support of CCSE's mission, according to this year's event chair, Maria Leonard Olsen, who also chairs CCSE's Schools Committee. "We had an extremely talented and dedicated committee who share a passion for the children we serve and worked hard to ensure the benefit's success," Olsen said.

Founded in 2005 around a dining room table in Kensington, MD by a tiny group of parents and Catholic school proponents, CCSE has awarded more than a half a million dollars to 18 Catholic schools to provide new or expanded special education programming to students with intellectual disabilities. In addition, it provides grants to Catholic school teachers seeking training in special education and other resources and support to schools, students and their families.

Keynote speaker Timothy P. Shriver, Special Olympics Chairman and CEO, told attendees at the sold-out benefit that supporting an inclusive Catholic education for children with intellectual disabilities is not a way of "helping" charity but rather a mandate for living the Gospel.

Shriver praised CCSE for its role in what he called a "deeply religious and deeply important" movement that recognizes students with special needs as having the same inherent value and dignity as all other students, and he urged supporters to spread the message to Catholic schools, churches and the community at large.

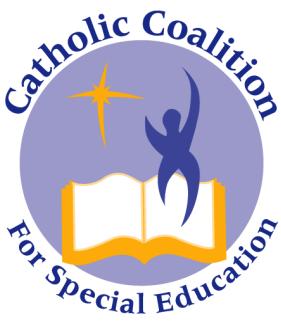
"We have the responsibility and an opportunity as a religious community and a people of conviction to work for a change of heart," he said.

Speaking to some 400 guests, Shriver noted that while laws have changed to accommodate students with special needs, in many ways, attitudes about including these children in classrooms alongside their more typically developing peers have not. CCSE works to dispel the myth that children with special needs will somehow delay or prevent children without special needs from progressing academically, socially and otherwise.

**CATHOLIC
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"Each of us becomes a better person for knowing a child who has special needs," said Olsen, a parent who became involved with the organization not because she has a child with special needs but because she recognizes how the entire school community benefits when all children are welcome.

"I have come to embrace the "rightness" of Catholic schools including children with disabilities of all kinds specifically because we are **Catholic** schools," said St. Mary of the Mills Principal Maggie Hubbard. St Mary, in Laurel, has benefitted from CCSE grants. "Believing as we do that every life is precious and every person is created in God's image and likeness, how could we possibly turn our backs on the children most in need of our confidence and care?"

CCSE Founder and President Francesca Pellegrino said CCSE is raising awareness and challenging perceptions with the support of the Archdiocese of Washington and Baltimore, whose school's benefit from CCSE grants. (Both Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington and Cardinal Edwin O'Brien, formerly of Baltimore, were honorary benefit chairs).

The benefit, itself, demonstrates CCSE's growth: the first benefit was held in a private home and included about 100 guests. This year, six years later, a supporter offered to host the event at his country club. The event sold out at 400 people and raised double the amount it raised just two years ago. That bodes well for CCSE advancing toward its goal of Catholic education for all.

"We are trying to reach not just parents of children with disabilities but also parents of all children as well as educators, priests and the entire Catholic community," Pellegrino said.

In addition to Shriver's remarks, the evening's highlights, expertly introduced by master of ceremonies Deacon James T. Nalls, included welcoming to the microphone Catholic school students from both archdioceses who benefitted because their schools received CCSE grants.

Established in Kensington, Maryland in 2004, the mission of the Catholic Coalition for Special Education (CCSE) is to ensure that children with special needs are able to attend and receive an appropriate education in their local Catholic elementary schools and high schools. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI "no child should be denied his or her right to an education in faith which in turn nurtures the soul of a nation." CCSE provides grants and technical assistance to help Catholic schools in Washington, D.C. and Maryland achieve this goal.

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