THE CCSE
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Believe in Me! Grants and Technical Assistance Bolster Inclusion

CCSE is delighted to add Little Flower School in Great Mills, MD (St. Mary's County) to its roster of schools as our 2024 seed grant recipient.

"We are proud that educating students with disabilities and forming them in the Catholic faith is an essential component of our school culture. Welcoming Mae and Henry is an additional blessing to our school," said Caitlin Keeton, principal at Little Flower.

Mae and Henry, siblings who have Down syndrome, joined the school this year thanks to a CCSE grant funding a full-time paraprofessional who will support both students. Mae, a second grader, will soon prepare to receive the Sacraments of Reconciliation and First Holy Communion, and her little brother, Henry, is thriving in the Pre-K-3 class.

In addition to seed grants, there is an ever-increasing demand from Catholic schools for CCSE's Technical Assistance. "Our pro-bono Technical Assistance is designed to ensure the long-term success, viability, and sustainability of a school's inclusion efforts," said Francesca Pellegrino, CCSE's Executive Director and Founder.

Thanks to your generosity, schools never receive a bill from CCSE for Technical Assistance services. The services

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Henry and friend enjoying school at Little Flower School in Great Mills, a recipient of a CCSE seed grant.

Faith and Inclusion Guide Isabelle's Life

A strong faith guides the Cannito family. Front row, l to r: Peter, Isabelle and Maggie; back row: l to r: Emma, Nicole, Greg and Amelia.

Bubbly, charming, resilient, and fiercely independent are ways Isabelle's mother describes her daughter. A senior at the Academy of the Holy Cross in the Moreau Options program,* Isabelle, who has Down syndrome, enjoys theater, dance, bocce, and is an award-winning cheerleader. She is also busy applying to college programs and enjoying her Senior year with friends in an inclusive environment!

Greg and Nicole Cannito, devout Catholics, are the parents of five children. Isabelle, their first-born, came along nearly 19 years ago. Within six months of her birth, she had successful open-heart surgery and has been achieving milestones ever since. No obstacle seems insurmountable for Isabelle, according to her mother. "Isabelle is a leader at home. Her younger siblings look up to her and are amazed at her courage," said Nicole. Her sister, Emma, adds "What I admire most about my sister Isabelle is how passionate she is and her eagerness to reach her goals."

When Isabelle was young, her late grandmother Marguerite (Margie), lived down the street and they spent time together every day. "My mother had a special relationship with Isabelle that continues to inspire and be a guiding light for her," said Nicole.

Catholic schools are important to the Cannitos. "We cherish the faith, values and moral standards Catholic schools offer ALL of our children, not just some of them." The Catholic faith is an important part of our daily lives," said Nicole. When the family was looking for a school for Isabelle, she noted that the Catholic Coalition for Special Education (CCSE) helped find options for Isabelle and helped provide resources to make

**A CCSE seed grant helped establish the now thriving Moreau Options program.*

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President's Message: *Minding the Mission of Inclusion*

Anna McDermott-Vitak with daughter, Breanna.

CCSE's mission has always resonated with me. I first encountered CCSE when I moved to Maryland and was looking for a Catholic school for my children that would include my daughter Breanna, who has Down syndrome. I was inspired by the late Sister Kathleen Lannak IHM, principal at St. John the Evangelist School, who assured a mother of a newborn with Down syndrome, "whenever your daughter is ready, we will welcome her at our school."

I remember thinking I want to be part of an organization that envisions that kind of welcome at all our schools!

Over the years I have witnessed countless "mission moments" compelling me to work harder and dig deeper with my personal time and financial support of CCSE. When Catholic schools open their doors to children with disabilities everyone benefits. Today's students are tomorrow's leaders and lessons learned from positive, inclusive Catholic education experiences will shape their future communities. Breanna was fortunate to attend Catholic schools in large measure due to the financial, technical, and emotional support that CCSE provided to the school teams.

As we are *Roaring into our 20th Year of Inclusion*, I am honored to accept the role of President of the CCSE Board. This is a milestone moment in CCSE's growth, thoughtfully planned and designed to equip CCSE for long-term success. As we approach the season of giving and reflect on our blessings, I hope you will support CCSE's mission to make inclusive Catholic education universally accepted. Blessings to all during this Christmas season!

Anna

President, Board of Directors

Executive Director's Message: *Roaring Into Inclusion: A Milestone Year for CCSE*

Francesca Pellegrino with son, Alex, who is the inspiration behind CCSE.

CCSE stands resilient and ready to support and challenge more Catholic schools to open their doors to all students, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities and to educate them alongside their peers.

Stories like Isabelle's (on page 1) inspire us in the work we do every day. Whether a son, granddaughter, nephew or friend, imagine the joy a family feels when a Catholic school says "yes" to including their loved one in classrooms alongside siblings, neighbors and friends. Unfortunately, this is often not the case, and CCSE continues to work tirelessly to be a catalyst for inclusion. Together, with your generosity, we can create a brighter future and improved lifelong outcomes for our brothers and sisters with disabilities.

The Board of Directors and I are filled with enthusiasm as Anna McDermott-Vitak embarks on her role as Board President. Anna, who has been an integral part of CCSE as parent, donor, volunteer, and board member, knows and loves this organization and its mission deeply. Thus, CCSE takes the necessary steps to ensure our long-term presence to accompany schools as they live out Christ's call to welcome the little children, all the children.

Your love and generosity empower CCSE to respond to the numerous requests we receive, ensuring that families find a place at the table and a Catholic school to call "home" for their children with disabilities. As the season of giving approaches and you gather around your own family table during the holidays, please remember how much we appreciate the good you have done and the difference you've made in so many lives. From the CCSE family to yours, many blessings for a joyful Christmas, much good health and prosperity.

Francesca

Executive Director & Founder

Faith and Inclusion Guide Isabelle's Life

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Isabelle and classmate work together during study period.

both Isabelle and the school successful.

Prior to attending high school, Isabelle had wonderful education experiences and close friends from K-8 at St. John the Evangelist School in Silver Spring and Our Lady of Lourdes in Bethesda. CCSE's fundraising, consulting and advocacy ensure Catholic schools welcome children with disabilities.

Like her peers, Isabelle has hopes and dreams for her future. She has a love for music, travel, and hanging out with friends and family. Right now, Taylor Swift and the band BTS are favorites of hers. She especially enjoys K Pop (Korean pop) and Asian culture. Isabelle has "an ability to connect to people and make them feel special. We are excited to see what Isabelle can accomplish and marvel at her motivation for independence and living on her own," said Nicole.

To parents of a child with a disability, Nicole says, "Embrace what is to come. Regardless of the challenges, children with disabilities are amazing for the unique way in which they share their gifts with those around them. They bring joy to their family, their school and community."

Self-Advocates Shine at Spring Benefit

Enjoying time on the stage with Emcee Shindana Crawford are l to r: Bella, Greta, Ory, Kathryn, Eddie and Davide.

Self-advocates starred at the 19th annual Spring Benefit on March 15. They dazzled the audience answering questions about school, their favorite subjects, and favorite teachers posed by Mistress of Ceremonies Shindana Crawford, principal of St. John the Evangelist Catholic School in Silver Spring.

The "Raise Your Hand for Inclusion" theme highlighted CCSE's efforts to encourage Catholic schools to open their doors to students with disabilities. This new generation of students showcased the importance of CCSE's work to be a catalyst for inclusion in area Catholic schools.

Co-chaired by Anna McDermott-Vitak and Mary Brogan, the evening also featured Katy Prebble, recipient of the Lifetime Achievement "Making IT* Happen Award." IT stands for Inclusive Teaching. Prebble, recently retired from the Academy of the Holy Cross as president, was honored for her trailblazing leadership.With seed funding from CCSE, Prebble established Moreau Options, a student-centered inclusive education program for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, now a model for schools around the country.

Save the Date March 22, 2025 for our Spring Benefit: Roaring Into Our 20th Year of Inclusion!

Golf Outing a Smash at Blue Mash

Self-Advocate Ben Stevick, (left), and friends enjoying the links.

Gray skies and a few sprinkles of rain didn't dampen the enthusiasm at this year's 7th annual CCSE *Believe in Me!* Classic golf tournament. Hosted this year for the first time at Blue Mash in Laytonsville, MD, the tournament returned to its regular Scramble format. A putting contest and multiple Hole in One contests added to the fun. With nearly 90 golfers turning out to support inclusive education in Catholic schools, the competition was fierce. However, the change of venue didn't seem to affect the winning team. For the second straight year, Warren Blanchard's foursome won the first-place prize. Congratulations to: Warren Blanchard, Ernest Jackson, Layton Johnson, and Keith Robertson. CCSE thanks all the supporters and sponsors who contributed to make this year's event a big success. The golf committee thanks all our volunteers whose dedication and hard work behind the scenes make this event possible.

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Sophmore Ory enjoys music class at Mount Saint Joseph High School in Baltimore. The school is a recipient of Technical Assistance this year and former seed grant recipient.

provided by Dr. Maggie Hubbard through CCSE would be difficult for schools to afford with their limited budgets. Last year, Dr. Hubbard provided more than 200 hours of services to the schools in addition to consultation, preparation and travel time. For the 2024-2025 school year, pro-bono Technical Assistance grants include awards to the following Maryland schools in the Archdiocese of Washington and the Archdiocese of Baltimore, representing five Maryland counties:

- Mount Saint Joseph High School, Baltimore
- St. Bartholomew School, Bethesda
- Saint John the Evangelist School, Silver Spring
- St. Thomas More Academy, Middletown
- St. John's School, Hollywood
- Saint Jerome Academy, Hyattsville
- Litte Flower School, Great Mills

According to Patricia Neumark, principal at St. Thomas More Academy, "Maggie Hubbard's technical assistance has been invaluable. Her calm, confident manner gently leads us in a good direction. She offers insightful feedback and embraces the entire class, not just those she is directly serving. Maggie is an integral part of our school team, and we are blessed to have her help. Thank you to CCSE for your support and this initiative, we would not have been as successful without it."

Caitlin Keeton of Little Flower notes, "We are so grateful to be able to access the expertise of Dr. Maggie Hubbard through our CCSE grant. Dr. Hubbard has been incredibly helpful to our teachers as they learn more about working with students with Down syndrome."

Brian Townshend, Director of Special Programs at Mount Saint Joseph High School, said "The Saint Giles Program is forever grateful for the technical assistance that CCSE has provided over the past three years. Dr. Maggie Hubbard provides us with resources and ideas that we incorporate into our daily instruction. Not only does Dr. Hubbard's support allow Mr. Schenk, Ory's aide, to effectively teach skills and content, her support also benefits our classroom teachers who work with Ory in his academic classes. As Ory prepares to transition into life after high school, Dr. Hubbard and CCSE also provide resources highlighting college programs and opportunities for Ory and his family to consider."

To find out how your school can receive a seed grant or Technical Assistance go to www.ccse-maryland.org/schools.html

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20 YEARS 2025 SPRING BENEFIT

ROARING INTO OUR 20TH YEAR OF INCLUSION!

Save the Date!

Saturday, March 22, 2025

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If You Believe in Me...I'll Believe in Me!