PRESS RELEASE

Leadership Expansion at CCSE –
Students like Karlena Reap the Benefits

Catholic Coalition for Special Education

PRESS RELEASE: August 27, 2024
CONTACT: Kathy Dempsey for CCSE, 202-359-4379

Leadership Expansion for CCSE 20th Anniversary Year

Students like Karlena Reap the Benefits

(Kensington, Maryland) – The Catholic Coalition for Special Education enters its 20th anniversary year strong 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 side-by-side with their peers.

Its work is not done. CCSE is expanding its leadership naming Anna McDermott-Vitak as the new President of the Board of Directors. This will enable Founder and former President Francesca Pellegrino to focus on implementing programs and new initiatives in her newly created role as Executive Director reflecting the board's deep commitment to and affection for the organization. Together this new leadership team will work to advance the mission of CCSE and to "advocate for students with disabilities so that all students desiring a Catholic education can find a place at the table and a school to call 'home,'" said Francesca Pellegrino, Executive Director and Founder of CCSE.

"I am filled with anticipation and enthusiasm as I look forward to collaborating with Anna in her new role. Anna is a seasoned professional bringing a wealth of business acumen and expertise from both the nonprofit sector and the corporate world. And what makes Anna's appointment even more special is the personal connection she has with our work at CCSE. Her daughter, Breanna, has directly experienced the transformative impact of CCSE's programs," said Francesca Pellegrino.

Anna McDermott-Vitak is a senior executive with more than three decades in the biotechnology industry (Amgen and Centocor) and in association leadership (Association for Accessible Medicines and Drug Information Association). Teamwork and cooperation have been the keys to success in the roles Anna has undertaken with experience in research, finance, advocacy and executive leadership.

Anna has been a supporter of CCSE since 2008 and was elected to the Board of Directors in 2013. Additionally, she has co-chaired the organization's premier fundraising event, the Spring Benefit, for numerous years. "Anna has been a part of CCSE as a parent, donor, volunteer and board member. She knows and loves this organization and its mission," said Francesca Pellegrino.

"I am honored to lead CCSE in partnership with Francesca and the Board," said President Anna McDermott-Vitak. "This is a milestone moment in CCSE's journey; a step that has been thoughtfully planned and envisioned to equip CCSE for sustained success and growth in the long term.

"The mission of CCSE has always resonated with me and I am excited to continue CCSE's efforts to make a lasting impact for children with disabilities in Catholic schools, like Karlena who has been blessed

to attend Catholic schools since kindergarten and is beginning her freshman year in high school at The Academy of the Holy Cross."

Karlena's mother, Karen Somerville, commented that having Karlena and her older brother "receive a Catholic education is important to us. So many parents have told us that they have a hard time finding a school that will welcome, include and provide a quality education for their children with differing abilities. Luckily we knew of CCSE's success. And CCSE's success means success for our children.

"Thanks to CCSE's seed grants, technical assistance and professional development, Karlena's schools and teachers at St. Philip the Apostle Catholic School and then at St. Bartholomew Catholic School were prepared to welcome her and ensure her success. They gave her the foundation she needed as she now becomes a Tartan at The Academy of the Holy Cross, a school that has long partnered with the Catholic Coalition for Special Education," said Karen Somerville.

Karlena's father, Keith Somerville, who serves as a deacon in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington DC said, "I am inspired by CCSE's commitment to Catholic education and to the recognition that every child is a unique gift from God. CCSE has not only helped our daughter Karlena but thousands of children with disabilities be welcomed into Catholic schools."

CCSE has reached over 9,000 students, teachers and families and awarded 78 seed grants to 33 Catholic schools in the greater Washington Baltimore region, totaling more than $1.3 million since its inception in 2004.

In 2019, CCSE was nominated by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington and was conferred the prestigious NCEA Seton Award as an Exemplary Model of Christian Service.

CCSE supports Catholic schools in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington and Archdiocese of Baltimore. CCSE's *Believe in Me!* grants to Catholic schools may be used by the schools to hire and train special educators, purchase equipment and materials, or provide appropriate accommodations and modifications to the curriculum. CCSE also offers technical assistance and training – all free of charge – to help schools be the best they can be in serving and teaching all God's children inclusively.

CCSE also provides scholarships to Catholic school teachers pursuing advanced degrees in special education and offers workshops and other training /coaching support to Catholic schools to help them meet the needs of students with disabilities at the classroom and administrative levels.

The mission of the Catholic Coalition for Special Education is to advocate for and facilitate an appropriate, inclusive, high quality education for students with developmental and/or intellectual disabilities in the Washington D.C. and Baltimore region Catholic schools to enrich their lives, schools, and the broader community.

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