

## ***Down Syndrome News, Vol. 27, No. 3***

### **What I Now Know About Inclusion...**

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*Editor's note: Feulner is the mother of a two-year-old son with DS. PEAK is the Parent Information and Training Center in Colorado and holds its annual Conference on Inclusive Education and School Reform in Colorado each January.*

The things I knew about inclusion prior to attending the PEAK Parent Conference could be easily summarized — as could my beliefs and arguments for inclusion. They went something like this: “Children with special needs need to be around other children who are modeling age-appropriate behavior if we ever expect the child with special needs to be age-appropriate. It is the right thing to do.” As a teacher, I have believed this for a long time. My convictions, vague as they were, only deepened when our son, Jackson, entered our lives.

After attending the conference, I have to admit my basic beliefs have not changed; but my convictions and my passion have. You see, I now believe what I say with all my being. I realize inclusion is my child's right — not something someone should do just to be nice or humane. I also know that settling for anything less than true inclusion places limits on my child.

Likewise, I know that it is a long fight that I must wage not only for my own child, but also for those who come after him. Even more importantly, inclusion can, and indeed does, work.

Children with disabilities deserve to be in an inclusive classroom, not isolated in a school's back hall where expectations are lowered and the children are devalued and set on the trail of today's society's version of leprosy. Schools must look at each child as an individual (a novel idea) not a label that is assigned, in some cases, even before birth. Until a child is given the opportunity to be in a typical classroom — not just “visit,” we cannot know that child's capabilities. It has been described as, “Mainstreaming is inviting a child in to visit, while inclusion is belonging.” We don't quantify a typical child's need or right to be in a particular class or have access to specific knowledge. We don't say, “Oh, he will never use this again,” or “I don't know what she will get out of this,” and then use these as excuses to exclude.

What about all of the equally important, and longer lasting, lessons learned in that typical classroom: how to get along and work with others, what is acceptable or not, how to work within expectations much more in line with real world expectations? It is in these classrooms, with a full and rich curriculum and social interactions, that students learn their weaknesses and strengths and what interests them. Why is it acceptable to

water down that experience for our children? But, this is done to children with disabilities every single day in this country, in this county, in your school.

I, like most parents of children with disabilities, tell myself daily, “I will never place limits on my child’s abilities. I will never assume he can’t or won’t do \_\_\_\_\_” (you fill in the blank). Likewise, each day our children amaze us by what they do, understand and achieve. We say it, we believe it and we love our children. Still, we have set expectations in our minds and almost daily they exceed them. We will never know our children’s true capabilities unless they are given equal access to education.

Inclusion advocates tell us that a successful student with a disability no longer can be considered an anomaly or an isolated success story. In schools where true inclusion is alive and well, there are countless amazing stories with varying degrees of success. By allowing our child to be segregated, we limit our expectations. That message is loud and clear to the child.

During the conference, I was with people who not only believe inclusion will work — they live it each day. I met teachers and administrators who are in inclusive schools. They know it works because they see it every day — not just for students with disabilities, but for *all* students in that school.

I met young adults who are successful and productive products of inclusive schooling. Young adults who remember the moment it began to really happen for them and how it forever changed them and how they perceived themselves. As a teacher, I found that so exciting.

I also found myself looking at challenges and logistics in the evolutionary process of becoming an inclusion school. I began to examine all the changes that must occur before a school IS inclusive not just something they offer the pain-in-the-neck parents to shut them up. As Jackson’s mom, I felt ashamed that I had ever doubted inclusion was anything but mutually beneficial. To doubt that, means I doubt my child’s ability to offer something to other human beings.

These teachers, students and administrators, as well as the consultants who work with them, will tell you this journey to inclusive education is not an easy process. It takes lots of work by school personnel, parents who push for it, and most importantly, the children in the classroom working hard each day. But they also quickly add two more points: 1) The rewards are worth the struggle hundredfold and 2) in any school where inclusion is alive and well, the teachers can name the one parent at the forefront who served as the catalyst for change. Empowering, isn’t it?

Finally, and maybe most significantly, if our children are not included in the regular classroom and excluded from the school community, why should we expect them to be

included in the community that follows — LIFE. If we allow our children to be excluded year after year, school after school, a cycle is established which continues forever.

A silent, yet powerful, message is sent to other children about people with disabilities when we segregate them from the rest of the population year after year. That message becomes deeply ingrained in the minds of those children as they become adults. Then, as adults, our children — almost as if they are invisible — are excluded.

Conversely, if children with disabilities are included in the school community, they feel that they belong and they *do* belong. If we can break the cycle, we can change the outcome. Now imagine schools where our children are included. Where they do not have to prove they are worthy to sit in a room and take in the conversation and information. Where accommodations are made to insure that they are learning, maybe not at the rate of every other kid, but they are leaning and participating and thriving. It can happen — it can work! We just have to believe it can, and stand firm and united for our children's right to be included.