

A Letter from America on School Inclusion

Dear Friends,

Here in the United States, the struggle for inclusion remains just that – a struggle that will not be finally won in my lifetime, and a struggle that is all the more worthy for that.

Our schools label more and more children and young people, export them into special education, and then allow them back into ordinary classrooms and celebrate themselves for being inclusive. Meanwhile, pupils with more substantial disabilities generally remain excluded for most if not all of their school time.

Those who slip through the fence into ordinary classrooms usually do so because of sustained parental advocacy, which is often costly in time and stress of standing up to school authorities, if not in money. Once present, they are more likely to be seen by classroom teachers as the responsibility of classroom aides who work under the authority of special education teachers than as full members of the class. Often, disabled pupils attend a sort of parallel school, physically present to the classroom for much of the school day, but disengaged from the real life of the class or the school. The older the young person, the farther their parallel school experience moves from the life of other young people and the less their real engagement with other pupils.

Many people here in the United States would disagree with this sketch as too pessimistic. Educators have become fluent in speaking about inclusion and see it as a competency that they have long sense acquired; a competency that authorizes them to judge who is “appropriate” for inclusion and how much inclusion is “appropriate” for those who pass the bar. Most would say that they are doing as much inclusion as is appropriate and reasonable and that the bad old days of “inappropriate” educational segregation are behind us. The most common problem recently reported in a survey of educators is finding ways to exempt students with intellectual disabilities from the round after round of performance testing that now governs our schooling.

Unfortunately, simply visiting a typical school shows that we are a long, long way from the day when all children are welcome, each child belongs, and all have the opportunity to be active learners together.

The classrooms and schools that are exceptions to this picture of inclusion as rhetoric – and their numbers here continue to grow slowly— confirm the power of students, families, teachers, and administrators working to create an inclusive school community. This only happens when disabled and non-disabled students and adults, parents and siblings, teachers and administrators form enduring, purposefully active alliances for inclusion. These alliances must assert over and over again what it is too easy for our education system to forget:

- Inclusion is not a professional intervention to fix children. It is a movement for greater justice that allows the development of school learning communities. It is not a question of “appropriateness” as judged by professionals but a question of doing what is right and just as judged by citizens. When inclusion seems incompatible with other priorities of schooling –such as performance on standardized tests—it is those policies that must come into question, tested by the human rights issues that are the foundation for inclusion.
- Inclusion does not belong exclusively to adults. Children and young people – disabled and non-disabled- are primary resources in identifying and solving the many problems that a school can learn inclusion by solving.
- Inclusion is for everyone. Any school might fail to find ways to reach particular students, but such failures must always be owned by the school and never be blamed on children and young people.

There are now thousands of living experiences that validate that inclusion is the right thing to do.

Erin McKenzie’s story reflects one of these experiences. Erin graduated from high school in June and died suddenly and of natural causes in August of this year. Included

from pre-school on, Erin wrote these words as part of her application for a place on a drama course (she won the place).

I'm a cool senior at Westerville South High School. Go Wild Cats! I have my class ring, my letter jacket for Drama Club, and my senior pictures to give to my friends. I go to dances and parties and hang out with my friends at school. Megan drives me to school. She has been my friend since grade school.

I love the theatre! I have been to New York to see plays and I see many in Columbus, too. At Westerville South, I am a member of the Drama Club and I have worked as an usher and on publicity. I also work for the Otterbein College Theatre helping to put the programs together and as an usher.

I love musicals and I like plays by Shakespeare. The first one I saw was *Romeo and Juliet*... I have seen *The Tempest* and a funny play about *The Works of Shakespeare*. The musical, *Kiss Me Kate*, has Shakespeare in it. I like to listen to music and sing and dance to movies and my CDs. I pretend I am different characters. I am Christine in *Phantom of the Opera*. I am Grizabella in *Cats*. Dancing is good exercise and I dance all the time...

Despite her continuing academic and social success, Erin's inclusion was always in question. Her family and friends and allies among her teachers had to continue to resist many pressures to move her out of the flow of the school's life. A school counselor recommended that Erin should be placed "with her own kind". Sadly, this clueless but powerful professional did not mean that Erin should be with other theatre lovers, but rather professionally "placed" with other people with Down syndrome.

In a message to those who mourned Erin's death with them, Erin's parents write,

Seeing Erin's spirit in each of the students, parents, teachers, administrators, staff, and community members that we have heard from has uplifted us. It has given us hope that this vision will continue for all.

Instead of visiting and helping those who are separated, let us bring all together and support one another. Instead of creating special groups or classes, let us welcome and offer each person the opportunity to share his or her own gifts and learn from each other. Instead of striving to be independent learners, perhaps we might embrace ourselves as the interdependent learners we are and need to be.

I wish you well as you pause to be interdependent learners and to gather new connections, new knowledge, and renewed spirit for the struggle.

John O'Brien