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Remarks on the 20th Anniversary of the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education

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Two years ago, I was in Baltimore interviewing people with autism for a documentary called "We Thought You'd Never Ask." Of all the people we can learn from – about autism and special needs – we almost never ask the people who actually face those challenges.

Well, that day two years ago, my whole outlook changed. As the father of a 14-year old boy with autism, I knew that people with special needs were capable of learning and achievement, but somehow I had quietly surrendered to the idea that we can distinguish people using labels like "low functioning" and "high functioning." See, those terms have become an excuse for judging all of these amazing books by their covers, assuming that people who have trouble demonstrating knowledge, well, might just be at a "lower level" and have less potential.

One of the people I met that day instantly became a friend – Jamie Burke – who you'll meet tonight. Another was Sue Rubin, a woman with autism in her 30's, who might casually be misjudged as "low functioning." Until – she expresses her thoughts by typing; independently, intelligently, and with a tiny smile every time she finishes a sentence.

When my friend Paula Kluth asked Sue, "Why inclusion?" Sue typed:

"We are just like you, with the same desires, and just need help to be typical members of society."

We are just like you. Both **Jamie** and **Sue** will tell you that they're not special cases. As Jamie wrote when he was in high school, "People are like very lovely stones on a beach. You may walk along the sands and see only one beautiful stone. Don't just pick that one up and think it's beautiful and the only one like it. All stones are worthy of being elevated from the beach. Remember that it took many years for that stone to become polished and smooth. It takes a world of people to bring polish to the stone."

What helped Jamie and Sue was that the people around them presumed that they were competent. And they did something more. Their parents and teachers and friends refused to think of them as being something different, something "over there." Instead, they told them "You belong here. You deserve to be here. You have a right to be here."

Tonight, we celebrate 20 years of work by the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education, to bring that right of inclusion to special needs students here in Maryland.

Why inclusion? We used to think that it provided students with opportunities for social interactions. Well, it does, but only if we actually include the student – not just in the room or in the corner, but in the activities, in the lesson planning - being willing to make adaptations to help that student to succeed. Only if we actually say, "You belong here."

But good inclusion is more than a social opportunity – it's access to the general curriculum; to interesting information. Not because we need students to pass a test, but because we presume their intelligence; because we believe that they can learn more than they might demonstrate. That's what people like Jamie and Sue teach us, and it's what the research is beginning to find.

The more we come to understand people with special needs, the more we realize that difficulty *demonstrating* knowledge has very little to do with the ability to learn and understand it. Think about it. None of us would know the name Helen Keller if someone hadn't presumed that she was competent. Fifteen years ago, people with cerebral palsy were assumed to be mentally retarded. As we've discovered ways to help them overcome their *physical* limitations and access communication devices, we're finding that many of those students have typical and above-average intelligence. We're beginning to learn the same thing about people with autism today. Like Sue Rubin says, "We are just like you."

For teachers, inclusion creates a responsibility to find ways for the student to access the curriculum – a responsibility that wouldn't be nearly as strong if the student was in a segregated class. Good inclusion calls on teachers to presume competence. For the typical students in the classroom, inclusion teaches acceptance, and compassion, and empathy. It teaches all of our children to look at people who are different and say, "You belong here."

But let's be honest – sometimes inclusion means a few minutes of disruption in the classroom. Some students might rock back and forth, or pace around the back of the class, or get frustrated, or say something out of context. Even then, when the other students in that class grow up, they may not remember the quadratic formula, or what a ribosome does, or what year Marco Polo came back from China - but what they *will* remember is how they were taught, by our example, how to accept the differences of others.

In the end, the best argument for inclusion is the simplest. Because it's the one we know by heart – that all of us are created equal. Why inclusion? We are just like you.

Congratulations to the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education on this 20th anniversary, with all of our wishes to keep changing the lives of special needs students for the better.

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