

Testimony for Community Forum at Einstein H.S. Oct.16, 2008

Louise Reynolds, Dylan Kuhnenn (son)

Introduce myself—Teach advanced journalism at Walt Whitman HS; been teaching at WW for 11 years; also parent of a child with special needs

Introduce my son, Dylan Kuhnenn,—sophomore at WW, following general ed curriculum, is fully included in the regular classroom. Dylan has Down Syndrome.

Would like to speak on two points—classroom materials and teacher training-- regarding special ed students included in a general ed classroom.

- Would like to underscore the need for developing and supporting UDL materials at all levels (reference Ricki Sabia's earlier testimony). As one special Ed English teacher I spoke with noted, it's like you have to reinvent the wheel with every novel you teach.
 - Curriculum revisions have asked teachers to do more with less time. A larger variety of materials—across several media-- that directly support curriculum objectives might remedy teacher frustration in this regard
 - Dylan is taking National, State and Local Government. Because Whitman, in concert with the County's effort to expose all students to honors or advanced placement level classes, has eliminated on-level NSL, Dylan is in an honors inclusion class.

While the teacher has slowed the pace of the class, the textbook and the assignments for the class remain a challenge. UDL would allow this teacher to continue to work toward the curriculum objectives, but would support him in differentiating materials for students with different learning styles or needs. Without having to reinvent the wheel.

 - In many cases, MCPS already has alternate formats of curriculum materials—these materials need to be more readily accessible.
- Would also like to encourage the board to fully fund, if not expand, training for general ed teachers as well as special ed teachers and paraeducators who work with special ed students in inclusion classrooms.

When MCPS discontinued the Learning Centers, the result was that most students who would have previously attended classes separately are now fully included in the general ed classroom.

Whitman has a small, but growing Learning for Independence program. Many of the LFI students are also included for one or two classes in general ed classrooms, and their parents want them included not just in art or Food Trends or PE, but in classes like Matter and Energy and Spanish.

How to make that experience a productive and educational one?

- Three of the four special educators I spoke with emphasized the need for more training--not just for special educators, but for general ed classroom teachers as well.
 - more training on how to co-teach—one afternoon on a single in-service day is inadequate, particularly for the many teachers who earned their certification or graduate degrees ten years or so ago, when inclusion wasn't so much the standard that it is today.
 - Often general educators don't know the depth of their students' disabilities and could use some information on strategies to help them.
 - There is no real standard—or guidance-- on best practices for co-teaching. Is the special ed teacher responsible for differentiating the material? Is the special ed teacher's job to take an equal share of grading for the entire class? Teachers need training.
 - Again, training on how to differentiate materials for a wider variety of students, absent UDL
 - Apparently, there are approximately eight educators assigned to school clusters to help facilitate inclusion, but few people know about them, and they probably couldn't handle the demand if everyone did.

Since we're obviously not going to lower the student/teacher ratio in inclusion classrooms in the coming year, let's use money budgeted for training to disseminate information about the resources we do have, to make those resources more readily accessible, and to ensure that teachers are comfortable and competent in their ability to work with all the learners in their classrooms.