



# “All are Welcome”

## Building the Capacity of Catholic Schools To Serve the Needs of Students with Disabilities

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In a March 2015 address to Italian Catholic educators, Pope Francis challenged educators to address the needs of those learners with special needs. He stated, “Indeed, the duty of a good teacher - all the more for a Christian teacher - is love his or her more difficult, weaker, more disadvantaged students with greater intensity.” Yet, there is a scarcity of the necessary resources to address the needs of students with disabilities who desire a Catholic education. In order to address this concern, an innovative partnership was created among the Andrew M. Greeley Center for Catholic Education - Loyola University Chicago, Aspire, an agency with a history of supporting individuals with disabilities in the community, and the Big Shoulders Fund. Thus, the “All are Welcome” program was created.

“All Are Welcome” (AAW) is an initiative designed to create systems of support for Catholic school principals and their schools to become innovative and creative in ways to meet the needs of students with disabilities within the Catholic school setting. The goal is to provide education, professional development and programming support to Catholic schools to ensure that “All Are Welcome” in their schools through three phases: increasing leadership capacity, developing building capacity and creating wrap around plans.”

The first cohort of AAW principals includes five principals from the Archdiocese of Chicago and five principals from the Diocese of Joliet.

## Increasing Leadership Capacity

Generously supported by the Big Shoulders Fund and other benefactors, the program starts by building the capacity of the Catholic school principal who is the leader with the ability to promote change and assure that “All Are Welcome” in their schools. AAW principals are first enrolled in a newly created graduate certificate program offered by the School of Education-Loyola University Chicago (the Leading Inclusive Catholic Schools certificate) to develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to lead inclusionary approaches within their schools. Courses focus on special education administration, developing multi-tiered systems of supports and creating systems to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Katie Carden, principal of SS Faith, Hope and Charity in Winnetka, commented on her participation in the program:

*In addition to the coursework in the certificate program, the principals participate in a directed externship coordinated by Aspire. This externship gives principals significant interactions with children with disabilities, their families and service providers. These externship experiences occur in a variety of settings: therapy sessions, community/recreational outings and family support opportunities.*

## Developing Building Capacity

The next phase of the AAW program is to build the school’s capacity to provide support for students with disabilities. This includes:

- 1) Building skills to meet the needs of children with disabilities and learning challenges in their school;
- 2) Monitoring outcomes and identifying needs for continuous improvement;
- 3) Developing a plan for the involvement of parents and other interested community partners to be involved in the creation of a plan for sustainability.

Teacher voice is incorporated into the development of the building professional development plans through a variety of needs assessments and protocols utilized in faculty learning sessions. Using those plans, customized skill-building and coaching sessions are created and conducted by the staff from the Andrew M. Greeley Center for Catholic Education and Aspire. Nikki Kanzia, principal of St. Scholastica School in Woodridge, observes:

*“With learning and assignments that span from creating solid Tier I systems in our schools to implementing strategies that support the staff and the teaching taking place in our classrooms, this program allows our Catholic schools to open the doors to all children and offer an intrinsically Catholic education to all-level learners.”*

## Creating Wraparound Plans

In order to accommodate students with more significant needs, a “wraparound” approach is utilized which taps into the network of services providers among public schools and outside providers. Principals and teachers work under the leadership of Aspire to creatively develop “wraparound plans” to respond to the needs of these students. Through the resources of this grant-funded project, schools have a modest fund to purchase related services (e.g., speech and language services, occupational and physical therapy, etc.) to increase the potential for success in an inclusive learning environment. Cyndi Collins, principal of St. Isidore in Bloomingdale commented:

*“(The therapist) observed, gave suggestions for curriculum modifications, gave ideas of where to find those modifications and even created quite a few for the aide to use. Probably the most important thing she did was give the teacher and aide a boost in confidence.”*

## Meeting the Standard

Benchmark 7.6 from the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools states, “Classroom instruction is designed to engage and motivate all students, addressing the diverse needs and capabilities of each student, and accommodating students with special needs as fully as possible.” “All are Welcome” is an approach to help Catholic schools meet this obligation. This approach provides opportunities for Catholic School leaders to create new visions for their schools so students with disabilities can attend their community Catholic school and be educated side by side with their typically developing peers. The AAW program also identifies paths of support for teachers in developing their approaches to teach children of all abilities. Ultimately, AAW helps Catholic schools find ways to support students with disabilities so that they can engage in their faith communities. Mickey Tovey, principal of St. John the Baptist School in Winfield, summarizes her participation by stating, “Research confirms that the benefits of Catholic education are spiritual, intellectual, economic, and social. How can we, in the name of Jesus, deny such benefits to children facing learning challenges? If our humanity and our worthiness for inclusion in the Kingdom of God are measured by our treatment of the most vulnerable, how can we deny admission into our schools to children who need us so?”

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