

Leaders Shape the Future

On January 20, 2010, twelve students who are a part of the *Pathways Lead Mentor Program* boarded a bus to Trenton, New Jersey on a mission that has become very close to their hearts — promoting “authentic” inclusion of all students in their communities and schools. These students, both with and without disabilities, are living examples of what they advocate for. Their written testimony given to the State Board of Education (SBOE) is posted on our website, www.PathwaysKids.org. The following speech, which was written and presented by Lead Mentor Nayna Shah, is one of several speeches given to the SBOE.

“GOOD AFTERNOON. We’re from Pathways for Exceptional Children, an organization started seven years ago to benefit children with special needs and to advocate for their inclusion in schools. And that’s why we’re here speaking to you, the State Board of Education, today. We want to first acknowledge the changes already made to the Core Content Curriculum Standards. We are very grateful for these adjustments and know we are on the road to authentic inclusion. Today we want to work with you



From left: Stephanie Jennis, Nicole Ravetier, Brian Carabello, Emily Bovasso, Aleta Nadolny, Adin Vashi, Rusty Van Ripper, Eden Weinflash, Kelsey Werner, Allison Werner, Eileen Ceconi, Melinda Jennis, Nayna Shah

to modify some of these standards. By changing these things, New Jersey can become a leader of inclusion across the United States.

“We believe inclusion is not something that can be managed, but something that needs to be led. Right now, New Jersey is not a leader. Our 10% out-of-district rate is startlingly high compared to other states. Thirty six out of fifty states had less than 3% of students in segregated placements.¹ So we are asking for a chance to collaborate with you to make inclusion real, to make inclusion real in New Jersey, and to make New Jersey a leader across America.

“We know authentic inclusion does not come from the back corner of the classroom or a separate room at lunchtime, and it most definitely does not come from a student in the hallway! Authentic inclusion

involves every student together in the center of the classroom, whether it is an art room, a gym, or a library. It involves all children working together and learning from each other. We are here to tell you authentic inclusion only has positive effects! And it can start by making New Jersey a leader,

because leaders shape the future.

“Now I’ll ask you: who else are the leaders? The children of today; and they will go on to change tomorrow, because the youth are the future. Not just the gifted and talented youth or the mainstream youth. Children with disabilities and children without make up the future of New Jersey and the future of America. And the partnership between them will have started in the classroom.

“Now you know why you’re so important in this process. The goals we’re setting are completely attainable and these alterations to the Curriculum Standards will achieve them. With you, we can make New Jersey a leader of inclusion for the children of today and tomorrow.

“Thank you for your time.”

— Nayna Shah,
Lead Mentor, 9th grader



Dream It Forward

Cranford University Program Dreams It Forward!

In April 2009, Pathways for Exceptional Children stood out to me as more than just a seminar at Cranford High School, but a long-term vehicle for our community to create relationships between all types of children. When Melinda Jennis explained to us that “these kids think you’re rock stars,” I knew that our student body could become role models, friends, and hopefully, “rock stars” to our special needs youth. Cranford High School adopted Pathways for Exceptional Children in May 2009 with hopes of providing friends and activities for the special needs elementary students of Cranford. This program has not only provided opportunities for our youth, but has given our Cranford High School students a learning experience of a lifetime and a chance to be a friend to someone in need of one.



Maddie, pictured on right, at a Cranford get together.

Pathways for Exceptional Children in Cranford, New Jersey provides individualized one-on-one experiences that enhance communication skills and promote relationships. University Program Director John Arlotta helps the students coordinate events that include a wide variety of activities such as dancing, bowling, arts and crafts, and indoor sports games. These activities allow the elementary students’ participation with their peers while having a positive experience. Raymond El Khoury, junior at Cranford High School, claims that “this program is the perfect

way to include these kids; their excitement and participation is really rewarding for us.” Sophomore Aleta Nadolny also agreed that “Pathways is such a special program; I take away just as much as the elementary students do.” Overall, Pathways has become a program that both high school and elementary students look forward to each month.

Pathways for Exceptional Children has become a huge aspect of my senior year at Cranford High School. Being a part of the Cranford University Program has allowed me to use my Honors Research Seminar class to explore an area of my interest, expand my knowledge, and find a potential career path for my future. Not only am I required to research the history of learning disabilities and personality disorders, I am able to further my studies through the events we coordinate at Cranford High School. Pathways for Exceptional Children has grown close to my heart and has become more than a research project but a lifetime involvement in special needs programs. My involvement in Pathways for Exceptional Children has been a rewarding experience that I plan to continue into my college career and beyond.

— Madelyn Johnstone, Senior, Cranford High School



Keeping Expectations High for Literacy

Pathways for Exceptional Children has taken literacy more than seriously — we have made it an essential part of everything we do. I have always been a tireless advocate for literacy and enforcing high expectations as a result of personal experience with my son, Jacob. When I was first told that Jacob, who was in preschool at the time, may never read or write, I never stopped believing that somehow there had to be way. It has not been an easy road. At the age of eight, Jacob scored a zero success rate in 13 out of 15 subtests when taking his educational evaluation. I will never forget reading through the evaluation and seeing “zero success” thirteen times over and over again. Fortunately, I never accepted for a second that my son could be a “zero” at anything. Today, Jacob is twelve and reads at a second grade level. Frequently, I am told by parents that people keep telling them their children have hit their limit for growth in reading. My response remains, unless they

are six feet under, they will always have capacity for growth if we continue to expect more from them, and deliver what they need. We need to expect more, both of ourselves and our children, to achieve more.

Pathways has continued to expand our literacy programs, and on February 4, 2010 we added a fifth grade literacy class that focuses on preparing children for the transition to middle school. Our next goal is to develop a high school class that will continue to build on literacy skills. Even with these programs, parents must remember that while progress toward curriculum level goals is important when formulating Individual Education Plans (IEPs), if a child cannot read, there is little foundation for employment. All too often basic skills drop off the radar and are not incorporated into IEP goals. Skills for reading are essential and every new word our children read and comprehend opens new doors. In today’s cyberspace society, which is largely text based, reading must continue to be a target we all work toward achieving.

— Melinda Jennis, President

Recreation Programs: Upcoming programs are posted on our website at the beginning of each month. You can visit www.PathwaysKids.org and click on “Children’s Programs,” or the Recreation Department’s website: www.montvillenj.org, Click on Municipal Services, then Parks & Recreation, then Forms & Flyers.



Redefining the future for people with disabilities.