

Rally for “Include ME!”

On March 18th, 25 mentors from Montville Township, Morris Plains, and Cranford took their second bus trip on a mission to continue to advocate for and present their views on inclusion to the New Jersey Department of Education. This time the mentors spoke to the State Special Education Advisory Committee (SSEAC). Similar to their January 20, 2010

trip to the State Board of Education, this group of students once again made a strong statement dressed in their bright yellow “Include ME!” t-shirts. The Lead Mentors proposed changes to SSEAC relating to core content curriculum standards that could help every child in New Jersey receive a better understanding of disability. The Lead Mentors emphasized how training about disability must go beyond just teachers to the other students who sit in the classroom. They shared with SSEAC about their experience with the “children teaching children” model and stressed how practical hands-on training has helped them as students to become more active and willing participants in the implementation of inclusion. One Lead Mentor who spoke reflected on her experiences in school as a child with special needs. As she told SSEAC, these curriculum changes, along with genuine inclusion, can have an immense positive impact on all students, both with and without disabilities.

After presenting these curriculum changes, the Lead Mentors informed SSEAC about the upcoming “Include ME!” events as follows:



Montville Township Community Park. More than just a walk, it will have a rally-like atmosphere with inspiring speakers, a release of approximately 200 yellow biodegradable balloons into the air, games, activities, music, and lots of good food and festivities. Registration is required for this free event and we are

encouraging everyone to wear his or her yellow “Include ME!” t-shirts as unification and support for this important cause.

1) May 21, 2010 — “Paint the Town Yellow”

The Lead Mentor’s will begin their first “Paint the Town Yellow” by encouraging students, businesses, and residents of Montville Township to purchase the yellow “Include ME!” shirts for \$10 and wear them on May 21. They will be progressively rolling out “Paint the Town Yellow” days in other towns throughout the year. School districts that participate will receive 20% of the proceeds from t-shirt sales to specifically help them build inclusive programs for children with special needs. The remaining money raised will go toward providing grants and building inclusive programs on a statewide level. The Lead Mentors have already gotten over 500 emails from people all over the United States inquiring about purchasing the shirts and have received multiple orders. We welcome everyone to participate. Our goal is to sell our first 2,500 shirts by the initial “Paint the Town Yellow” date of May 21, 2010.

2) May 22, 2010 — Pathways “Include ME!” Walkathon

Our walkathon for inclusion will be held at

3) June 26, 2010 — Pathways “Include ME!” 5K Race

Every year the 5K Race attracts over 350 runners. This year, they will take to the streets wearing “Include ME!” t-shirts.

Our vision is to make New Jersey a leader in the inclusion of children with special needs. This vision goes far beyond merely lowering out-of-district rates or just sitting children in general education classrooms. We are asking for everyone to join with us to ensure that all children are included and given every opportunity to develop a genuine sense of belonging in their schools and communities. We believe New Jersey can become a leader in the nation by encouraging students to unite for acceptance of diversity and to become leaders in their schools and communities for inclusion. Please join with us in this vital cause and to help lead New Jersey to success for all students!

— Eileen Ceconi, Lead Mentor

Lead Mentors meet with New Jersey Department of Education

On March 3, 2010, representatives of Pathways' Lead Mentors met with a team from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the NJ Department of Education. At the meeting, Dr. Roberta Wohle, Director, Ms. Peggy O'Reilly, Manager of Bureau of Program Development, and Mr. Robert Haugh, Transition Coordinator,

worked together with the Lead Mentors on developing practical ways to encourage genuine inclusion of children with special needs. The following action plans were put in place to be accomplished by May 15, 2010:

- a) OSEP will check with the Office of Curriculum Standards on the revision process and timing for the proposed curriculum updates (see *"authentic" inclusion testimony on Pathways' home page at www.pathwayskids.org*).
- b) Both OSEP and Lead Mentors will look at core content curriculum standards in social studies and health to find connections for disability acceptance and awareness and how they can be currently implemented.
- c) OSEP and Lead Mentors will brainstorm about conducting training sessions at Learning Resource Centers to help disseminate information on the "children teaching children" model and how to help school districts facilitate inclusion more effectively within their student population.



d) OSEP will send the Lead Mentors information on how to apply to speak at the New Jersey Teachers Convention in Atlantic City in November 2010.

e) Lead Mentors will work with Bob Haugh on how to make "Dare to Dream" a more inclusive program, and submit a presentation for the June conference.

We thank Dr. Wohle and her staff for listening to the Lead Mentors' suggestions and vision, and understanding the need to make inclusion a daily process. The students began their efforts at the grassroots level, and many have worked with Pathways for up to eight years to help bring inclusion to students with disabilities in schools and communities where they live. They have helped train students, initiate inclusive programs for children with disabilities, and advocated throughout the state. They have received the respect of state, municipal, and school officials and are beginning to gain their support and understanding for the immediate need to further expand inclusion efforts. They are scheduled to meet with state Commissioner of Education Bret Schundler on May 4, 2010. These students are shining examples of leaders of the future who are not just talking about inclusion but actively searching for ways to take it into the trenches and making their vision a reality.

Lead Mentors to speak at KIT National San Diego Conference



The Lead Mentors are actively involved in advocating and speaking throughout the state of New Jersey. As a result of their achievements and personal experiences with inclusion, they were invited by Kids Included

Together (KIT) (www.kitonline.org), a national organization in San Diego, California, to apply to speak at their 6th National Conference on Inclusion on September 30 – October 1, 2010. The Lead Mentors invested a lot of time and effort preparing their application and are proud to announce they were chosen by KIT to speak for 90 minutes in a break-out session. Representatives of the group will travel with Melinda Jennis, President of Pathways, to the Bahia Resort Hotel in San Diego for the conference. In their workshop, titled "Dream it Forward," they will be sharing their vision for inclusion and the success of the "children teaching children" model. Congratulations to the Lead Mentors for all their hard work and dedication!



Leading by example

Montville Township school district has been very fortunate to have Dr. Rita Seipp as our Interim Superintendent. The Lead Mentors met with her this past February to discuss their plans for Pathways' "Include ME! Turn the Town Yellow" day and to

get her approval to take their vision for inclusion to new heights. No sooner had the Lead Mentors told her their ideas than Dr. Seipp began helping them to strategize on how best to organize the event and make it a success in Montville Township schools! Her excitement and encouragement was refreshing to these children who are so dedicated, but often hit obstacles in their quest to make New Jersey a leader in inclusion. There is no doubt that Pathways for Exceptional Children is a grassroots organization, but when leaders from the top down support efforts such as this, the collaboration produces remarkable results. This month, our "Dream it Forward" ribbon goes to Dr. Rita Seipp for supporting our youth who are working so hard to become leaders of social change in their community and throughout the state!



Dream It Forward



Redefining the future for people with disabilities.