True Inclusion:

An Advocacy Story About Belonging, Access, and One Student's Place in General Education



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WHO AM I?





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Doctorate of Educational Leadership-University of Northern Iowa
Advanced Studies Certificate (ASC) Principalship-University of Northern Iowa Master's in Teaching-Morningside University
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Bachelor's of Arts in Psychology, Minor in Spanish-Morningside University

Inclusive CONNECTIONS LLC
Education Consulting

MY FAVORITE COLOR IS BLACK!
I LOVE SPENDING TIME WITH MY HUSBAND JOE, AND OUR 4 CHILDREN CARSON, BRIGHTON, NORA & GABI AND OUR PUP, BLUEY!
I COULD LISTEN TO CHRISTMAS MUSIC YEAR ROUND!


we
can
do
hard
things

In the Beginning....



Special Needs

There's a Label.


SPECIAL EDUCATION
REPRESENTATION
LEARNING
MODIFICATION
SPECIALIZATION
DIVERSITY
UNDERSTANDING
DIFFERENTIATION
REINFORCEMENT
SCAFFOLDING
PERSONALIZATION
OUTREACH
PARTICIPATION
EVALUATION
INSTRUCTION
READINESS
ACCESSIBILITY
ADVOCACY
CURRICULUM
SENSORY
INDIVIDUALIZATION
INCLUSION
ENGAGEMENT
DEVELOPMENT
COLLABORATION
COMMUNICATION
ASSESSMENT
RESILIENCE
DISABILITIES
INTERVENTION
ADAPTATION
MAINSTREAMING
EMPOWERMENT
CLASSROOM
DIAGNOSIS
REGULATION
ASSISTIVE
NEURODIVERSITY
SPEECH
NEEDS
PEDAGOGY
RIGHTS
SOCIALIZATION
SUPPORT
COGNITION
BEHAVIOR
COMPETENCE
INTERVENTIONIST
STRENGTHS
RESOURCES
VARIABILITY
PROGRESS
EQUALITY
EXCEPTIONAL
LITERACY
EVIDENCE
PLACEMENT
TEACHING
RESPONSE
ALTERNATIVE
DIFFERENTIATED
FLUENCY
AUTISM
WELLBEING
EDUCATION
STRATEGIES
BEHAVIORAL
DEVELOPMENTAL
PEDAGOGY
THERAPY
VISUAL
GROWTH
DYSLEXIA
HEARING
CHALLENGE
UNIVERSAL
DISPARITY
EMOTIONAL
FOCUS
EMPOWERMENT
TAILORING
PROFICIENCY
NORMATIVE
STANDARDIZATION
EFFECTIVENESS
ETHICAL
GENERALIZATION
DISTINCTIVE
SUPPORTIVE
SUSTAINABILITY
AWARENESS
PREPARATORY
INCLUSIONARY
SPECIALIZED
PROGRESSION
OPTIMIZATION
NURTURING
MEDIATION
MEASUREMENT
LEGISLATION
MULTICULTURAL
PSYCHOLOGICAL
NEUROCOGNITIVE
LINGUISTIC
RESEARCH
TRANSFORMATIVE
MULTISENSORY
IMPLEMENTATION
TRANSITION
PHONOLOGICAL
INTERDISCIPLINARY
MAINSTREAM
THERAPEUTIC
CULTURAL
INSTRUCTIONAL
COMPREHENSIVE
CONTEXTUAL
CREATIVITY
DYSGRAPHIA
SOCIAL
STRENGTH-BASED
NUMERACY
REMEDIATION
NOTATION
KINESTHETIC
HOLISTIC
EXPERIENTIAL
TAILORED
ALTERNATIVE
APPROACHES
FACILITATION
INDEPENDENCE
ASSIST
SKILLSET
CRITICAL
SPECIAL
METHODOLOGY
VERBAL
INNOVATION
PERCEPTION
MULTIDISCIPLINARY
IDENTIFICATION
PERSONALIZED
RECOGNITION
DYSCALCULIA
REHABILITATION
TRANSITIONAL
PRACTICAL
INQUIRY
PERFORMANCE
DATA
MINDSET
RESOLUTION
ITERATIVE
AUGMENTATIVE
DEFICIENCY
INTEGRATION
STRUCTURE
EMPOWERING
REFLECTION
PHONEMIC
PARAPROFESSIONAL
INFLUENCE
ADAPTABILITY
INCLUSIVE
APTITUDE
PARADIGM
ENVIRONMENTAL
FUNCTIONAL
SOCIETAL
FRAMEWORK
RESPONSIVE
STRATEGY
PRAGMATIC
INDIVIDUALITY

Traditional “Special Education Route”



“What if inclusion isn’t about finding a place for a student, but changing the place so the student can belong?”





Beliefs vs. Details

Inclusion begins when someone is willing to believe that a student belongs before knowing exactly how to make it work.





Where is our Focus?

The Student:

- Has an intellectual Disability
- Does not read on grade level
- Does not perform on grade level for math
- Has speech delays
- Must have a para

The Student Behind the Label

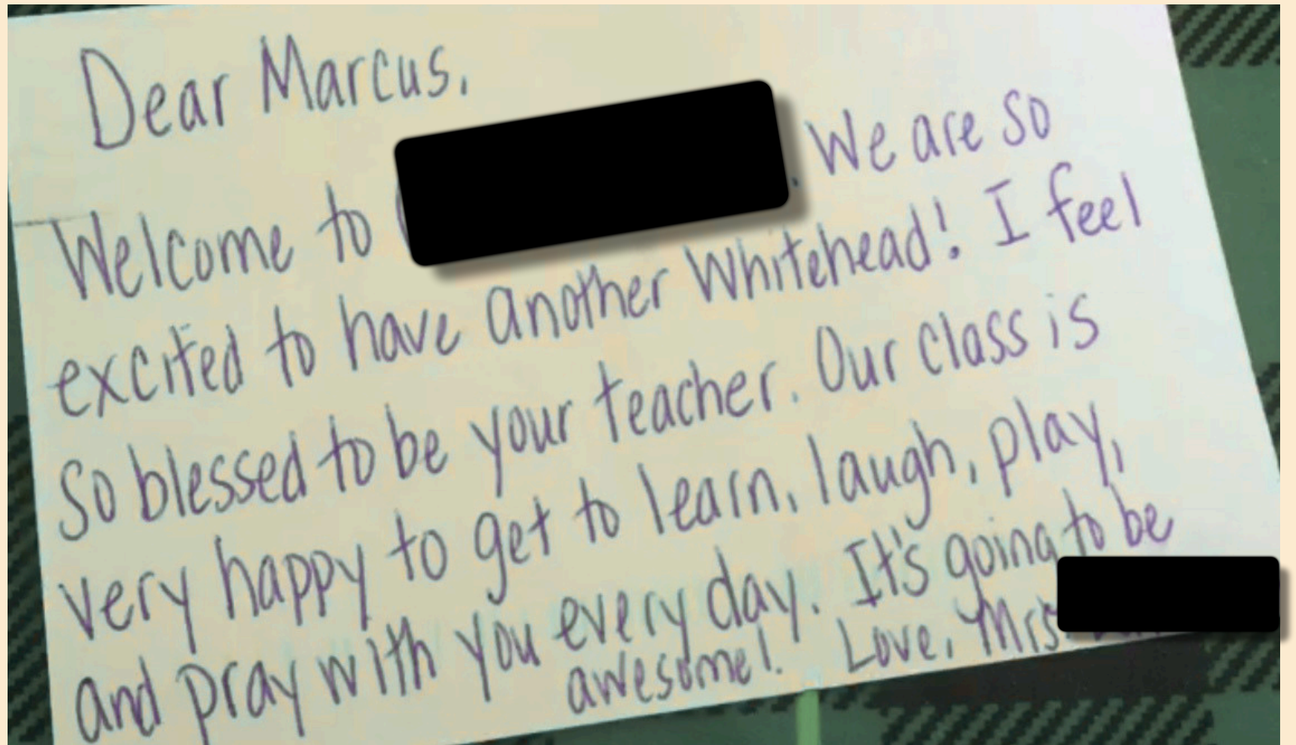
- Is a son, brother, cousin, nephew, uncle and grandchild
- Loves all things sports including the Kansas City Chiefs, Philidelphia Phillies and Florida Gators
- Loves singing along to popular music
- Is a dog whisperer and loves animals
- Loves Pokemon and playing with his cousins/friends



A disability is part of a student's story-it does not define a student's identity.

Why Not Marcus?

Challenge the status quo: But we've always done it this way.





Find the Advocate

Leadership advocating for inclusion must be willing to:

- Question traditional placement decisions.
- Listen to families.
- Center the student's voice.
- Support teachers through challenges.
- Allocate resources creatively.
- Protect inclusive practices when they become difficult.
- Hold the team accountable for meaningful participation.
- Communicate that every student is a valued member of the school community.



“What kind of school are we building if we only make room for students who fit easily into the system?”

The Mindset Shift

Moving from “Can we do this?” to “What will it take to make this successful?”





- Academic expectations
- Staffing
- Classroom integration
- Safety
- Resources
- Are we meeting the student’s needs?

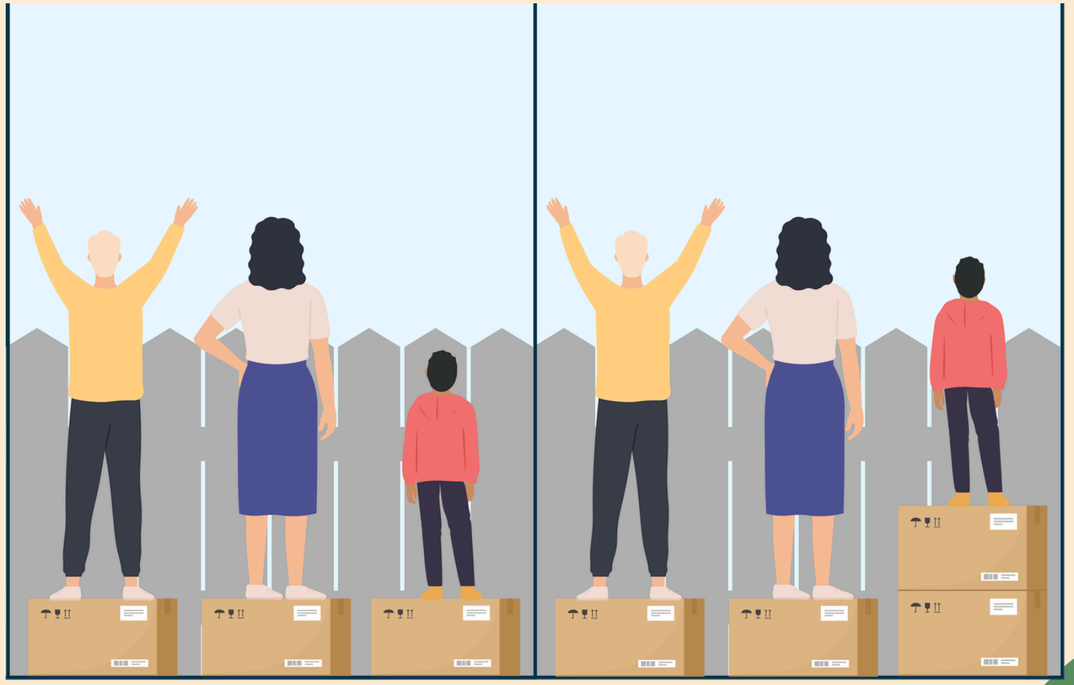
The Mindset Shift

Inclusion is not a seat in the room.
It is meaningful participation and belonging.





Building the Conditions for Success



Equality Equity

Equity means giving students what they need to access the same community and opportunitie

The Framework

Access + Participation + Belonging + High Expectations = True Inclusion



The Resistance

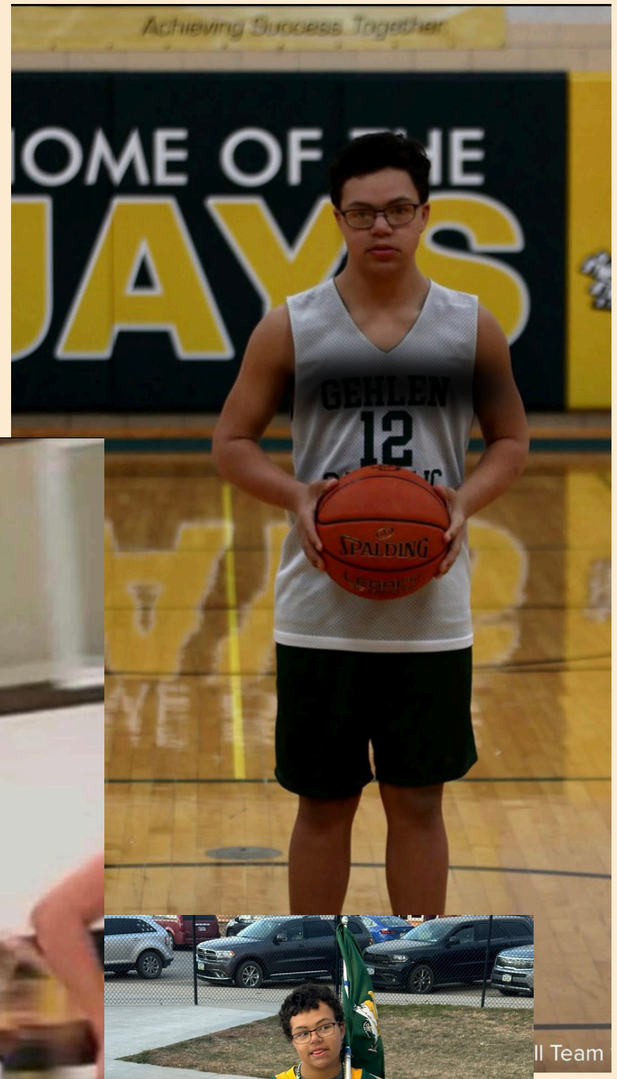


Inclusion isn't always easy—and difficulty is not evidence that inclusion is wrong.

The Turning Point









The Ripple Effect









Inclusion doesn't only change the life of the student being included—it changes the community doing the including



Lessons Learned

- Start with possibility, not limitation.
- Presume competence.
- Inclusion requires intentional design.
- Support the adults so they can support the student.
- Listen to families and students.
- Expect challenges without abandoning the vision.
- Measure belonging, not just placement.
- Never confuse disability with inability.



The Student Is Not the Problem to Be Solved

“True inclusion doesn't ask whether a student is capable of belonging. It asks what we need to change so that belonging is possible.”

One decision created an opportunity.
One team changed its practices.
One student gained a community.



Inclusion is not something we do for students—it is something we build with them.


Be the "I" in KIND
KIND
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