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TESTIMONIAL ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

*By Chaela Christianson, Special Education Teacher
Columbine Elementary School, Woodland Park, Colorado - 1994*
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Revolutionary Common Sense from Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

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In late summer of 1992, we had the first of many IEP (Individualized Education Program) staffings for Benjamin, a kindergartner. It resembled a SUMMIT MEETING that required months of planning in order to assemble all of the GREAT POWERS from both the PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SECTORS.

Finally, the MAJOR LEADERS of the different COUNTRIES convened, armed with pens, clipboards, and files filled with detailed reports describing observations, assessments, evaluations, progress, concerns, and recommendations. There were THERAPISTS: physical (2), occupational (2), vision, speech and language; ADMINISTRATORS: the special education director and the school principal; MEDICAL PERSONNEL: nurses and health specialists; TEACHERS: classroom, resource, assistants; PARENTS: Kathie and Mark; CHILDREN: Benjamin and his sister, Emily; and ADVOCATE, LIAISON, AND FRIEND: Charmaine.

There was a CHANGING OF THE GUARD from private therapy administered in an isolated and segregated setting to public school—moving toward a new direction which provided for service delivery in Benjamin’s classroom. He would not have to experience being removed from his peers.

STRENGTHS AND NEEDS were discussed, and GOALS were developed and interwoven in the daily schedule. The resulting IEP goals (and those thereafter) filled approximately 15 pages, and the document bore a strong resemblance to THE CONSTITUTION.

Inclusion has been a slow, but steady process of change with many gains and a few setbacks along the

way. There have been many discussions, meetings, frustrations, misunderstandings, and, sometimes, the shedding of tears. But during this journey, we have learned acceptance, respect, and love—and all have benefited. The impetus for change has come from Benjamin’s parents and teachers—his advocates—and from Benjamin, himself.

The 15 pages of goals have been reduced to three major goals in the second grade. Benjamin has friends and can state his needs. He can tell the kids when help is appropriate and when it isn’t. He is no longer a class mascot, but a vital member of the classroom community. He has taught me how *not* to hover over him. He has good role models and is a good one himself.

Now in third grade, Benjamin’s IEP is loosely written in *plain English*. The members of Benjamin’s team are really working together to see him as a whole child and not a group of *body parts*. No more goals about increasing his upper body strength and so on. We now know what’s important for Benjamin to learn—by listening to Benjamin, his family, his friends, and his teachers.

His mother said it best at one of our many meetings: “If Benjamin doesn’t ever learn to walk independently, he can still have a good life. But if he doesn’t receive a good education, if he isn’t prepared to live in the adult world just like the other kids, then he won’t have a good life. We have the same dreams and goals for Benjamin as we do for his sister: to be a regular kid, to have friends, to grow up and live the life of his dreams. Without a real academic education, none of that will be possible!”

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Today, Benjamin is always in his regular classroom. He's never pulled out and the therapists work with his teacher and the teacher's aide on a consult basis. Related Services now have meaning to Benjamin: they occur throughout his academic day with the help of his teacher, the teacher's aide, and his peers. He's learning real-world skills in a real-life classroom with his classmates. We modify the curriculum and provide whatever supports and accommodations he needs to be successful, including a laptop computer, standing frame, and other technologies and techniques. But we're not just teaching Benjamin, *we're learning from him*: learning about how kids with disabilities are really like all kids, learning about ourselves and our fears, learning about life, and learning that *all kids can learn and that all kids belong together*.

Our success is measured in many ways: from parents of other kids who tell us how great it is that their kids are going to school with and becoming friends with kids with disabilities, from classroom teachers who have been challenged by a new way of educating kids and who have come out of it thrilled with their own unique success stories, and from the

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kids, themselves, who continue to amaze us with their capabilities and their patience—patience with *us* as we struggle daily to do it right.

Recently, Benjamin inquired about the reason for his family's moving to Colorado from Texas. His mother told him part of the reason was so he could attend his neighborhood school in a regular classroom. She then had to explain how most kids with disabilities were educated in the district they

moved from, and Benjamin was outraged when he learned that a self-contained special education classroom would probably have been his placement in that district.

While I have had the good fortune to be Benjamin's resource teacher this year, Benjamin, his family, and his classroom teacher have been *my* resources! They are the ones who have helped shape the direction of my thinking by focusing on the important things in life—like belonging, friendship, feelings and the ability to express

them, independence, and the uniqueness of every human being. Once those things were in place, we were able to concentrate on the academics.

And that's where we are today: providing Benjamin Snow with the academic and social tools to help him grow into a successful adult.

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Note from Kathie, Benjamin's Mom:

Chaela developed this article in 1994, and the efforts of Chaela and the other wonderful educators paid off: today, Benjamin is a successful college student!

My children's elementary school was a pioneer: it had become an inclusive school way back in the late 1980s. And yet, many years later, educators from coast-to-coast continue to believe, "Inclusion is a fad..." or "We're still not ready..." or "The students are not ready..." or "Inclusion works for some, but not all..." Educators, students, and students at Columbine and other schools where inclusive practices are the norm prove that none of those statements are true, nor can they be justified!

As described in other articles, inclusion is always a "process," not a "product." As Chaela noted, it can involve a "daily struggle" to do it right—and it's a struggle worth doing, because the outcomes for students, teachers, families, and our society, as a whole, are awesome!