

I am currently the coordinator for Circle of Friends. I teach Interrelated Special Education 3rd-5th grades. In my opinion, the most critical fact about me is that I am a living testimony to the importance of integration of all persons in society, because I am quadriplegic from a Spinal Cord Injury that occurred in 1996 and a wheelchair user. My integration back to work was crucial to my self-esteem and emotional status. The acceptance from my students, parents and the staff was monumental to my recovery process.

I can only imagine what special needs children must feel when they see non-special needs kids playing without them and passing them in the halls as if they do not exist. These special needs children are isolated in their own rooms and often have no interaction with non-special needs students throughout the day. Unfortunately, they may be stared at and made fun of by others that have no idea who they are.

The Circle of Friends program allows for a school wide initiative to integrate, include and accept all persons no matter their ability or disability. It encourages regular education students to make it part of their normal routine to accept those with special needs and become buddies and develop a friendship. The regular education students begin to bond with their “buddies” in ways they never expected. They see a broader range of abilities simply through the exposure to students with disabilities. The stereotypes of disability start to disappear and the appreciation for individuality begins to grow. They understand the aspects of a disability, whether it is the muscle impairments and speech delays of Cerebral Palsy or the facial differences of Down’s Syndrome.

The benefits of this program are remarkable and I feel the important ones are when a personality within the body containing a disability starts to shine. Emotions are seen rather than impairments. Abilities are seen rather than disabilities. Friendships are sprouted instead of just buddies. Acceptance occurs without hesitation. The ironic thing is that the effects of this program are often seen from the regular education student first!

Education about math facts is just as important as education of acceptance of others. It decreases bullying, peer pressure, depression, absences, tardies, behavior problems and self-esteem issues of both regular education and special education students. They feel needed and appreciated from the connection of their buddy.

In conclusion, for this program to continue and to grow it takes dedicated people and funding. This funding is necessary to plan events, for student transportation, staff support, advertisement of events and ongoing communication, implementation and improvement. Please take time to consider funding for the Circle of Friends program and benefiting the lives of all children and young adults fortunate enough to be involved in this life changing program. Thank for your consideration of this need!

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