

Choosing Inclusion

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I learned early in life that being different demanded much more than love. It required action and had to be intentional for things to change. My brother has autism. He wasn't diagnosed until recent years because a few decades ago, many children with special needs were either misdiagnosed or didn't have a diagnosis at all, although having a disability. Once, my mother was told by a second-grade teacher and the principal of the school he attended that my brother would never succeed in life. I was very young, but I still remember teachers mocking him. Today, my brother holds a master's in geography and is a successful middle school teacher.

Changes happened so quickly after section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act 1975 and the 1990 ADA law that the educational system took a while to adjust. These changes, which are frequently updated, were created to ensure that individuals with special needs accounted for what they could do rather than what their disability stated. Now possibilities were in place, benefits were available, and the parents of these individuals didn't have to go through what my mother went through, or so they thought so.

Since my start as an educator, I have had one goal in mind, and I fight daily to ensure students have all they need to succeed, whether having a disability or not. As mentioned before, even with the recent law changes, individuals with special needs and their families still need help to navigate the academic years, either for lack of teacher training or the bureaucracy they must go through to obtain resources to strive in school. My passion led me to seek partnerships, such as the Advocacy Network on Disabilities, that facilitate tools for these families lacking so much help and support.

Choosing inclusion was never a doubt. The opposite, it was the only way. My mission was always to create an inclusive culture where students are given equal opportunities to grow and have all the support they need. With the guidance of available inclusion and other partnerships, after-school, and summer camp grants, like The Children's Trust, my organization grows every year more and more to attend to the needs of participants and families of individuals of all abilities. I discovered that involving the whole community in this journey was vital to a thriving inclusion environment. Working with teachers, providing professional development training, and helping families reach the resources they need for their child makes us one step closer to our inclusion goals. Last year, after participating in the peer learning group and becoming a certified inclusion advocate by the Advocacy Network on Disabilities, I implemented the "Guiding

Families & Inclusion Resource Book.” an innovative project performed at the Kids Learning Center of South Dade III.

The project aimed to have a tool that would serve as a map for families seeking available resources for children with disabilities. The project’s vision is to utilize KLC’s inclusion and community resources book to provide families with appropriate guidance and support to help individuals with special needs thrive and successfully participate in all school activities. Having a procedure that goes from an initial interview, sharing partners’ contact information with caregivers, and follow-up meetings brought us endless possibilities and great results. We can now assist and guide the families in our community even more.

Although the laws are in place, public institutions and other organizations sometimes still need help to provide an ideal inclusion setting. I will continue to work towards excellence in inclusion, not because I want perfection but because I can make a difference by doing what is right. Little by little, the “Guiding Families & Inclusion Resources” initiative can set up an example for other educators, hoping that one day, all can choose inclusion, such as I did.