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EDUCATION

Amazing Grace

An independent school that thinks differently about diversity

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Many parents with school age children, as well as others who are invested in the long-term success of schools and school systems, value diversity in the classroom. As represented by race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, interests and other criteria, diversity is a point of pride in many Providence schools and is high on the list of desirable criteria among families in the process of choosing schools for their children.

However, cognitive, emotional and developmental diversity are not always as immediately appreciated. Often, families worry about their children's progress and status in classrooms that include significant numbers of children with disabilities, this despite a preponderance of research that demonstrates that all students in appropriately staffed and managed inclusive classrooms benefit intellectually as a result of additional support and increased adult attention. Students without disabilities who learn in inclusive classrooms also gain powerful and enduring social-emotional skills including empathy, tolerance and the ability to grasp another person's value beyond immediately discernable differences.

The Grace School (<http://www.meetingstreet.org/ProgramsServices/TheGraceSchool/tabid/165/Default.aspx>), a small independent school located in Providence that serves students in kindergarten through sixth grade (with a planned expansion through eighth grade in 2017), provides a powerful example of inclusion in action. A part of Meeting Street, a Providence nonprofit that provides programs and services for students with a range of disabilities and challenges, the Grace School serves 105 students, of which a third receive special education services. Students receiving special education services come to the Grace School from various school districts across Rhode Island. The rest of Grace's students are children without disabilities who apply to attend the school. Their families pay tuition, with 70% receiving financial aid.

Head of School Margaret Knowlton described a typical Grace School classroom as impressively diverse, bringing together children from across the spectrum of ability. Grace School students also represent different races, economic strata, language background and other factors. Students learn in classrooms of 16 to 18 students staffed by two teachers certified in elementary and special education, as well as varied numbers of teaching assistants. All students learn together, moving through the curriculum in ways that support and challenge each of them at their levels of ability.

Curriculum coordinator Susan Vander Does shared that Grace School educators take an intentional approach to inclusiveness, building opportunities for group connection, communication and reflection into the school day. This thoughtful commitment to creating and sustaining healthy and highly functional classroom groups helps students see past differences and understand more about their fellow students' personalities, abilities, likes and dislikes – all of what makes us unique.

Grace School parent Maureen Sigler commented on her fourth grade son and first grade daughter's experiences. Observing that her children are thriving academically, Sigler also noted that they have been able to develop the understanding that "every child has something to contribute. With their classmates, they feel safe, loved and valued for who they are as people." Sigler added that her son lacks organizational skills (to which I, also the parent of a fourth grade boy who is a bit, shall we say, scattered: join the club!) but that he's "working toward it. Everyone is working toward something, and their needs are being met in a holistic way."

These glimpses into the benefits of life and learning at the Grace School can help us see how inclusive approaches in other settings can create the conditions for enduring interpersonal skills and habits of mind that will benefit children at least as much as the academic support they're also likely to find. Though the Grace School educates students with a wider range of challenges than most other schools, children in classrooms in many schools today will learn with students who are different from themselves and from each other in all sorts of ways, and in ways that are meaningfully different than the classrooms in which we – their parents – learned. This is especially so in urban classrooms, which often serve students with higher rates of disability diagnoses, English language learners, and emotional challenges.

With two key components – appropriate levels of teacher support and thoughtful, intentional approaches to social-emotional learning – these inclusive urban classrooms are great places for all students to learn, grow and become their best selves. Unfortunately, these two essential components, especially a committed and effective approach to

social-emotional learning alongside academic mastery, aren't always present. Rather than hastily concluding that inclusion is ineffective, our collective task is to ensure that those resources are there for all students.

Smart News

Hope High School Stars Victorious at New England Track and Field Championships

As fall high school sports are in full swing, let's take a moment to celebrate East Side athletic achievement from this past spring. Track stars from Hope High Schools earned gold medals at the 70th New England Track and Field Championships held at Thornton Academy in Saco, Maine during the weekend of June 12. Quashira McIntosh won the 200 meters. McIntosh beat her own state record in the 200 meters with a personal best time of 23.64 seconds; she set a meet record as well. McIntosh also took the silver in the 100 meters. Whitney Jackson won the triple jump title, besting the state meet distance by more than a foot. The Hope Blue Wave team of McIntosh, Whitney Jackson, Chevell Burgess and Isis Hack also won gold in the girls' 4x400 medley relay. Congratulations to these athletes and all who participated.

College Athletics Recruiting Advice from Moses Brown Graduate

Some high school athletes, including the formidable Quashira McIntosh, the Hope High School track star who earned a scholarship at the University of Nebraska for her sports and academic achievements, need information and support to navigate the college recruitment process. Based on his own experience, Moses Brown alum Jack Stallman, a 2014 graduate, created "The College Athletic Recruiting Process," a nine-page guide for students that shares critical information about the process. Starting with advice for freshman, Stallman's guide provides insight into academic preparation, documenting sports and other achievements, communicating with university coaches and more. Stallman, now a sophomore lacrosse player at Trinity College, provides valuable insight for any high school athlete who wants to know more about college recruiting from a student perspective. Stallman's guide is available at the Moses Brown website at www.mosesbrown.org

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