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## **“Together We’re Better” Inclusive Education Campaign and Artwork Contest Final Report**

Inclusive education happens when children with and without disabilities participate and learn together in the same classes. It is our civic responsibility to contribute toward the strengthening of our schools as places that accept and include of all children; where children are welcomed and have an equal opportunity to receive high quality inclusion. For a long time, children with disabilities were educated in separate classes or in separate schools and to some extent, this practice continues to this day. Studies continue to show, however, that when children with varying abilities are educated together, positive academic and social outcomes occur for all children involved.

The Arc Maryland received a \$2500 grant from the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council to support its initiative “Together We’re Better;” Inclusive Education Campaign and Artwork Contest. Specifically, the contest invited Maryland’s elementary and middle schools to reflect upon the diverse abilities of all students with the goal of raised awareness of the value and importance of inclusion of students with disabilities through participation in an artwork contest and disability presentations.

The initiative commenced at the end of National Inclusive Schools week (December 4 - 8th) which is a week that highlights and celebrates nationwide the progress schools have made in providing a supportive and quality education to all students, including students with disabilities.

The “Together We’re Better” Inclusive Education Awareness Campaign brought together all students, parents, educators, school systems, and government agencies as they championed inclusion. This year, The Arc Maryland partnered with the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council, Maryland Department of Disabilities, and Maryland State Department of Education as we doubled our efforts to present a more robust program to encourage inclusive schools and to bring the concept of inclusion to life.

The Maryland State Department of Education, Assistant State Superintendent, Marcella Franczkowski shared a letter of commitment to the Special Education Directors across Maryland to commemorate the end of National Inclusive Schools week and encourage participation in the Together We’re Better program. “The bottom line is - no matter what the activity was, we know the importance of inclusive schools and how they seek to find solutions when students have intensive needs; use collaborative problem-solving in team work; welcome students who are diverse; and work with families to develop truly individuated services for each student, said Ms. Franczkowski.”

In this changing world, we recognize more than ever there is a need to educate and celebrate the principals of unity, diversity, and inclusion. The need to learn about disabilities and take part in awareness activities is a step toward breaking down barriers and helps reshape the attitudes of people so there is inclusion for everyone. The Together We're Better campaign enabled a model for our community that our strength comes from diversity; and through our differences in race, religion, or disability. The message in the artwork of First Place Contest Awardee (Kennard Elementary) said it best; "One world, one family, one heart - we're better together!"

One of the major goals of "Together We're Better" Inclusive Education Campaign and Artwork Contest was to ensure elementary and middle school students designed and created artwork demonstrating their knowledge and ideas gained during disability awareness activities. The contest encouraged artists to incorporate the theme, "Together We're Better" in their work and to embrace the understanding that every student is unique and therefore, learns differently. To reach this goal, The Arc Maryland created and shared a "Diversity Celebration Toolkit" with over 400 schools, art teachers, PTA Councils, administrators, and community partners. The toolkit contained lesson plan ideas, books and movies that promoted acceptance, and website resources for more information. It is apparent that more and more educators and schools are including disability awareness into their teaching curriculums.

The Artwork contest and awareness activities provided the opportunity for students to engage in activities that created a sense of caring and community. Students read books related to disability awareness and acceptance and viewed videos to understand disabilities among other documented activities. In all, these activities empowered our schools to expand their capacity to support inclusive practices and build a school where everyone belongs.

One middle school student stated, "their disability seems to be seen first and we have to see them as a person first and include them." The students understood the activities and learned quickly that inclusive education is about children with and without disabilities - whether the disability is mild or severe, hidden or obvious -building friendships and having opportunities is important to people of all abilities and the foundation for building inclusive schools.

The Arc Maryland is pleased to announce that 61 students submitted qualifying artwork for the contest and 8 students were selected to receive awards with their schools. The full list of awardees includes:

- **First Place** - Kennard Elementary School, (Queen Anne's County) and Chesapeake Terrace Elementary School, (Baltimore County);
- **Second Place** - Matapeake Elementary School, (Queen Anne's County) and Kennard Elementary School, (Queen Anne's County)
- **Third Place** - Rock Creek School, (Frederick County) and Kennard Elementary School, (Queen Anne's County)
- **Honorable Mentions** - Kennard Elementary School (Queen Anne's County) and Chesapeake Terrace Elementary School (Baltimore County).

The artwork of all students was then displayed throughout Maryland at libraries and other public venues. The final exhibit was on June 8<sup>th</sup> at The Arc Maryland Annual State Convention

where an award ceremony honored some of the student artists and their schools. Each placed awardee received a gift card and a special Certificate of Recognition for their honors. While the Artwork Contest was one component of the “Together We’re Better” Inclusive Education Campaign for elementary and middle school students, the other component was our “Together We’re Better” Disability Awareness assemblies and presentations.

Disability awareness is very important when it comes to breaking down stereotypes and overcoming preconceptions regarding disabilities. We know there is still prejudices in our society regarding disability. Through our initiative, six (7) individuals with disabilities visited nine (9) schools where they provided a presentation to the student body and answered questions to raise awareness of disabilities. The presentation format included the experience of a person with disabilities, their interests, and explored challenges and successes. The presenters provide tips for how students could include others with disabilities in and out of school. The student assembly participants were then invited to complete one-page post-activity surveys that demonstrated attitudinal changes and increased knowledge following campaign activities.

Nine (9) Maryland Schools hosted the disability awareness assemblies throughout Maryland during the campaign with 22 schools indicating a level of interest in hosting assemblies in the 2018-19 school year. More than 1958 students throughout the state in classes K-8 observed the disability awareness presentations lead by self-advocates with assistance from Arc staff.

The steering committee for this project recognized early on that the later school year start to this initiative, combined with changing requirements for “volunteer presenters” in some school systems that happened mid-year, created a barrier to accomplishing the desired number goal of assemblies during the 2018-19 school year. This data has been very helpful as we plan for the 2018-19 Together We’re Better Campaign, and informs our strategies to engage more schools and community artwork display venues.

**Ninety-eight (98%) percent of student participants who completed the survey indicated satisfaction with the presentations they experienced.**

**In addition, nine-eight percent (98%) of students surveyed indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that their attitudes about students with disabilities had changed, and that they had increased their knowledge and understanding of a person with a disability.** One Saint Pius X school student said, “I learned that everyone is human and just because you look or act different doesn’t mean you should be treated differently.”

To ensure a statewide impact of the Together We’re Better Initiative, The Arc Maryland leveraged connections with our local partner Arc chapters and this has resulted in a campaign reach that extends from the Eastern Shore to the Western Region of the state focusing on education for youth with and without disabilities who live in rural, urban, and suburban areas in Maryland through participation in inclusive schools activities, utilizing the Together We’re Better toolkit, and attendance in Together We’re Better assemblies.

Toward the end of the fiscal year, The Arc Maryland received more calls from school professionals who had heard about the program outreach and wanted to secure our services for the new school year. One school who asked The Arc to conduct Together We're Better presentations during the current campaign school year was a school that was struggling with bullying in its 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade classes. We provided three "Together We're Better" experiential trainings/discussions with the students in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classrooms, and we were later informed that our presentations had opened eyes and helped to create the more welcoming atmosphere teachers were hoping for.

The "Together We're Better" Inclusive Education Campaign and Artwork Contest reminds us that we can all make a difference. While our work is not yet complete, we wish to acknowledge the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council's investment of the grant and partnership which has aided the success of the project.

We believe the "Together We're Better" Inclusive Education Awareness Campaign and Artwork Contest has positively influenced attitudes about inclusions of people with disabilities in all aspects of life, and served to enhance a shared the vision that all students belong and that people of all abilities benefit when they have the opportunity to live, learn, work, and play together.

