

Digital Commons  
@ LMU and LLS

Journal of Catholic Education

Volume 19 | Issue 3

Article 10

May 2016

# Students with Developmental Disabilities in Catholic Schools: Examples in Primary and Secondary Settings

Meghan M. Burke

*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*, [meghanbm@illinois.edu](mailto:meghanbm@illinois.edu)

Megan M. Griffin

*University of New Mexico - Main Campus*, [griffinm@unm.edu](mailto:griffinm@unm.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

 Part of the [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Burke, M. M., & Griffin, M. M. (2016). Students with Developmental Disabilities in Catholic Schools: Examples in Primary and Secondary Settings. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 19 (3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1903102016>

This Article is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Journal of Catholic Education* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu). To contact the editorial board of *Journal of Catholic Education*, please email [CatholicEdJournal@lmu.edu](mailto:CatholicEdJournal@lmu.edu).

## Students with Developmental Disabilities in Catholic Schools: Examples in Primary and Secondary Settings

Meghan M. Burke, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
Megan M. Griffin, University of New Mexico

*While some Catholic schools include students with disabilities, few serve students with significant support needs. This paper offers two distinct models for including students with developmental disabilities in Catholic schools at the primary and secondary level. Describing programs at Children of Peace School and Notre Dame College Prep School, this paper discusses each program's history, funding, student composition, programming, transition supports, and outcomes. Implications of these models are discussed, as well as the need for further inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic and other private schools.*

### Keywords

developmental disability, inclusion, religion, Catholic education

Over five million elementary and secondary students attend private schools in the United States, with 46% of those students attending Catholic schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Unlike public schools, which are obligated by federal law to educate all students with disabilities, Catholic schools are not required to accept these students. And, with a tradition of rigorous academic and behavioral expectations, Catholic schools have historically excluded students with disabilities (Carlson, 2014). Lacking funding and professionals with specialized training (e.g., Crowley & Wall, 2007; Durow, 2007), a dearth of resources is often cited to explain why many Catholic schools do not admit students with disabilities.

Recently, though, a growing number of Catholic schools have come to accept students with disabilities and provide services to support their learning (Bello, 2006). In the public school population, roughly 13% of students have disabilities, whereas in private schools, 4% of the student population has disabilities (Strizek, Pittsonberger, Riordan, Lyter, & Orlofsky, 2007). However, while Catholic schools have generally become more accepting in the past

decade, many continue to exclude students with disabilities (Bello, 2006), and many others are still only beginning to provide education to this population (Hunt, Joseph, & Nuzzi, 2002). Among schools that do offer programming for students with disabilities, they vary widely in terms of type and level of support offered (Bello, 2006).

Students with developmental disabilities rarely attend Catholic schools; for example, Bello (2006) conducted a survey with a stratified random sample of 300 Catholic high schools across the United States. Only 5.6% of the schools served students with moderate/severe disabilities (Bello, 2006). Other studies have similarly documented that when Catholic schools do admit students with disabilities, the students tend to have milder disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities) and do not require extensive support (Bimonte, 2004). Because Catholic schools rarely enroll students with developmental disabilities, the literature on this topic is limited, with few illustrations of the ways in which Catholic schools can support these students.

Given the limited examples of Catholic schools that accept students with extensive support needs, the purpose of this study was to illustrate the evolving efforts of two Catholic schools to include students with developmental disabilities. Specifically, our research question for this study was: How do Catholic schools support students with developmental disabilities? To answer this question, we conducted case studies of two Catholic schools that admit students with developmental disabilities: Children of Peace School and Notre Dame College Prep School.

Before describing the programs at each school, we present the historical precedent and rationale for inclusion in Catholic schools, as well as the barriers to admitting students with developmental disabilities in the Catholic education system. Next, we discuss the importance of documenting and disseminating information about inclusive programs. We then describe the two programs with respect to their histories, funding, student compositions, programming, support for transition, and outcomes. Finally, we discuss the potential for Catholic schools to be more inclusive, as well as future directions for inclusive Catholic education.

### **Historical Precedent: Catholic Education and Students with Disabilities**

Although Catholic religious orders and dioceses in the United States have historically provided education and other supports to individuals with disabilities, these services were largely offered in segregated settings (DeFiore,

2006). Beginning in the early 1900s and burgeoning in the 1960s, Catholic dioceses and religious orders began to establish segregated schools for students with specific disabilities (e.g., deaf students; Buetow, 1970). By the mid-1960s, over 70 segregated Catholic schools were in operation across the United States, with one in nearly every Catholic diocese (DeFiore, 2006).

With the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]), educators in Catholic schools began to consider how to teach students with disabilities alongside students without disabilities (DeFiore, 2006). Drawing on Catholic faith and teaching, in 1978, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops urged Catholic school educators to improve their supports for students with disabilities. Decades later, the Catholic bishops reiterated that Catholic schools must continue to improve the ways in which they support students with disabilities (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005).

Despite encouragement from Catholic leadership, much work remains to better support students with disabilities in Catholic schools (Bello, 2006). The National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) has attempted to address this issue by identifying examples of Catholic schools successfully meeting the needs of students with disabilities (DeFiore, 2006). By identifying successful examples and disseminating this information, the NCEA has begun to describe strategies for supporting students with disabilities in Catholic schools; however, models for including students with developmental disabilities remain limited.

### **Rationale for Inclusive Catholic Education**

People with disabilities and their families value faith just as much as those without disabilities (Kessler Foundation, 2000). While not all individuals with disabilities and their families identify with or practice in a faith tradition, they all have the right to do so. Though this is a fundamental right, many people with disabilities are denied this opportunity and “experience limited opportunities for spiritual expression” (TASH, 2003). Thus, it is important that people with disabilities have equal opportunities to worship, participate, and be educated in their faith. Individuals with disabilities who value religion deserve the necessary support to engage with their faith communities, including in educational settings (Ault, 2010). Hence, the argument about inclusive education is not restricted to Catholic schools particularly,

but applies to all faith traditions and to all types of communities associated with them. Though this article is focused particularly on Catholic schools, efforts to promote inclusive schools and communities are found in many other faith traditions (e.g., Buursma, 2010; Grossman, Morton, & Brooks, 2012; Jaka, 2012; Stegink, 2010).

Another argument for the admittance of students with disabilities in Catholic schools pertains specifically to Catholic faith and teaching. With an understanding that each human is endowed with dignity, the Catholic faith affirms the value of every person (Scanlan, 2009). Additionally, Catholic Social Teaching values community inclusion in supporting individual dignity (Scanlan, 2008). And, acknowledging the role of the Church in addressing injustice, Catholic Social Teaching asserts that the Church must prioritize the needs of individuals and groups marginalized by society. Thus, Catholic faith and teachings clearly support the dignity of people with disabilities, their inclusion within communities, and the commitment of the Church to marginalized populations.

A final argument for *inclusive* Catholic education relates to the benefits reaped by students with disabilities, as well as their peers without disabilities. Our use of the term “inclusive” here refers to the provision of individualized and appropriate supports to students with disabilities in general education classes (Stainback & Stainback, 1990). Public schools must offer a continuum of placement options ranging from least restrictive (i.e., full inclusion with peers without disabilities) to most restrictive settings (e.g., homebound instruction or residential school for students with disabilities). Inclusion in general education provides students with disabilities access to both academic and social opportunities that are generally not available in segregated settings (Downing & Eichinger, 2008). The general education classroom offers students with disabilities access to the core curriculum (Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007), greater opportunities for growth in communication and social interaction (Rafferty, Piscitelli, & Boettcher, 2003), and the benefit of typically developing peers modeling age-appropriate behavior (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Further, research has shown that students without disabilities benefit from the inclusion of students with disabilities in their classes as well (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Katz & Mirenda, 2002).

Thus, research in the public school system has clearly documented the benefits of inclusive education for students with disabilities. This research base provides ample evidence to support inclusive educational practices, not only in public schools, but in Catholic schools as well. Because Catholic in-

stitutions have historically provided educational and other services to people with disabilities in segregated settings, it is all the more important to reiterate this emphasis on inclusive practices within Catholic schools.

### **The Barriers to Inclusive Catholic Education**

Though progress has been made, supporting students with disabilities continues to be a challenge for many Catholic schools. A primary barrier to inclusive Catholic education is the lack of financial resources to fund needed services. Under IDEA and subsequent reauthorizations, Catholic schools may receive a small share of federal funding for educating students with disabilities (Eigenbrood, 2010). Frequently, though, federal funding insufficiently covers the services needed by students with disabilities (DeFiore, 2006). Without adequate financial support, Catholic schools struggle to fund services and personnel to appropriately support and include students with disabilities. This issue becomes even more pronounced in considering the resources needed to appropriately serve students with developmental disabilities.

A second critical barrier to inclusive Catholic education is that no formalized office oversees the inclusion and support of students with disabilities in the Catholic school system (Bello, 2006). Lacking a formalized office, there is little uniformity of direction and implementation across Catholic schools with respect to educating students with disabilities. As Bello (2006) has suggested, there is a need to establish a “guiding framework for planning, implementing, and evaluating inclusion” (p. 478). Without oversight and a clear framework to coordinate the efforts of individual schools, developing a cohesive program for students with disabilities across Catholic schools will remain a challenge.

A final barrier to inclusive Catholic education is the lack of information about successful models. Without the benefit of a formalized office devoted to this issue, individual schools have limited opportunities to learn from the experiences and examples of other private schools that have successfully implemented inclusive practices, and remain relatively isolated in their own efforts to include students with disabilities. Additionally, the literature includes few articles focused on the intersection of religion and special education (Ault, 2010; Carter, 2007). Given the limited literature on this topic, educators and administrators in Catholic schools are left with little guidance regarding successful strategies to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities, particularly students with developmental disabilities.

## **The Value of Promising Models**

Prior replication of existing programs has emphasized the need for greater documentation of inclusive programs. Historically, parents of children with disabilities are often the primary advocates for inclusive settings for their children. For example, in Virginia, the Harringtons wanted their son with Down syndrome to attend the school that his siblings attended, Paul VI Catholic High School (Powell, 2004). However, their intention for his schooling was more challenging to realize than it had been for their other children. The Harringtons encouraged school officials to visit the Options Program at Eastside Catholic High School in Seattle, Washington, in order to observe the implementation of a program that includes students with developmental disabilities. Inspired by this visit, Paul VI Catholic High School replicated the Options program in 1998 and began including students with developmental disabilities. In 2003, the school served 216 students with a range of disabilities, including students with intellectual disability.

The story of the Harringtons and other families who have successfully advocated for the inclusion of their children in Catholic schools illustrates the importance of disseminating information about promising models that have already been developed. Indeed, it seems that such models are a key component in encouraging Catholic schools to consider developing inclusive programs for students with developmental disabilities.

## **Method**

### **Case Study Methodology**

To explore how individual Catholic schools have enrolled and supported students with developmental disabilities, we conducted descriptive case studies to collect rich data about the development and implementation of two such programs (Creswell, 2003). Case studies are characterized by three qualities: they are particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam, 2001). Being particularistic indicates that the study focuses on a certain situation or program; in this study, we focused on Catholic schools admitting students with developmental disabilities. Being descriptive, case studies provide a rich, thick description of a phenomenon; in this study, we described how schools provide supports and programming to students with developmental disabilities. Finally, the heuristic element indicates that the case study will improve the understanding of the problem; the case studies presented in this study

provide unique approaches to addressing the challenges of providing services to students with developmental disabilities in Catholic schools.

### **Participants**

We used purposive sampling to select two schools that met our two-pronged inclusion criteria: (a) the Catholic school must enroll students with developmental disabilities, and (b) the Catholic school must offer some degree of inclusive programming. Our exclusion criteria were: schools that did not enroll students with developmental disabilities or schools that enrolled students with developmental disabilities but did not offer any inclusive programming. We consulted with officials of the Archdiocese of Chicago about schools that met our inclusion criteria.

Two schools in the Chicago area met the inclusion criteria: Children of Peace School and Notre Dame College Prep School. Though not fully inclusive (in that not all students with disabilities participated exclusively in general education settings), these programs did provide opportunities for students with disabilities to learn alongside their typically developing peers. The program at Children of Peace School afforded a continuum of services to elementary school students who were deaf or hard-of-hearing. The Burke Scholars Program at Notre Dame College Prep supported students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in both self-contained and general education classrooms.

### **Procedures**

After reviewing the literature on inclusive education in religious schools, we identified key factors in the development of programs for students with disabilities in Catholic schools. These factors included the history of how the school began admitting students with disabilities (i.e., Bacon & Erickson, 2001; Powell, 2004), funding mechanisms (Bacon & Erickson, 2001; DeFiore, 2006; Taylor, 2005), as well as student compositions and entrance criteria (Taylor, 2005). We discuss these factors in the following sections, along with each program's academic and social programming, supports for students transitioning out of the school, and any available outcome data.

### **Data Collection**

Based on the key factors (i.e., history, funding, student composition and entrance criteria, programming, supports, and outcome data), we determined



that the needed data were publicly available. We collected information about these schools via the following sources: newspaper articles, radio and television reports, promotional videos, the school websites, and other publicly available documents (i.e., school brochures and newsletters and online videos posted by the school). In total, this material represents 301 single-spaced pages of data. To find newspaper articles, we conducted Internet searches as well as contacted each school for any smaller media mentions we might have missed. We also conducted a general Internet search by typing in the name of the school and the program for students with disabilities; all available information resulting from this search was included in the data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

We analyzed these data using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Based on the literature and prior research, data were coded with respect to history, funding mechanisms, description of students, academic and social programming, transition, and outcomes. First, we organized the data with respect to each theme and date. We examined each piece of data using a line-by-line approach. New data were constantly compared to previously coded data to determine if the new data represented a new code or belonged to an existing code (Creswell, 2003). For example, we found a newspaper article describing the academic and social programming of the school; we then compared the data in the article with data from the school website to detect any differences or similarities with respect to programming. We then discussed our coding and developed definitions for each code. The authors then reviewed all of the data again using the new codes and their definitions. The authors debriefed about the codes resulting in a consensus about each code. The authors then organized the codes into themes.

### **Validity and Reliability of Data**

As described above, we drew on multiple sources to collect data on each school (i.e., newspaper articles, other media, websites). This allowed us to triangulate data and increase the reliability of our findings. To ensure the accuracy of our description, we member-checked our findings with administrators at each school (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). We received their approval regarding the accuracy of information. We also searched for negative cases to further refine themes (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005).

## Results

### Children of Peace School

**History.** Holy Trinity School for the Deaf (HTSD) was established in 1957. The school, founded by Catholic Charities, initially served 11 deaf students. Because the number of students has grown each year, the school expanded into a second building in 1964. In 1994, the Chicago Archdiocese consolidated HTSD with two other Catholic schools from the area. HTSD was then renamed Children of Peace School. Children of Peace then began serving students with and without hearing loss.

**Funding.** A variety of funding sources supported the HTSD program at Children of Peace School. For example, families of students in the program paid an additional \$200 above the regular tuition. Also, a percentage of earnings from all school fundraisers were allocated to the HTSD program. The Big Shoulders Fund, a nonprofit organization that supported Catholic schools in inner-city Chicago, also provided an annual grant to the program. Finally, the Cardinal Stritch Foundation was a nonprofit organization with the exclusive purpose of fundraising to support HTSD programming. The Foundation provided funding for scholarships, instructional equipment, faculty support, and operations costs.

**Description of students.** The HTSD program served students ranging from preschool to eighth grade. To participate in the program, students had to have a primary disability of hearing loss. Students may have had additional mild or moderate disabilities such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or learning disabilities. The school may have also accepted younger children with hearing loss and developmental delays. Because of limited resources, students with a comorbid diagnosis of intellectual disability or autism spectrum disorder were not accepted in the program.

To determine if a student was appropriate for the school, the HTSD program coordinator first met with the parents. The coordinator also reviewed the student's Individualized Family Service Plan or Individualized Education Program, as well as past evaluation reports. Also, after receiving parent consent, the coordinator contacted the prospective student's current teacher for additional information. Finally, the prospective student shadowed a current student in the HTSD program for a day. If the coordinator and family agreed that the student was appropriate for the program, the child was then accepted as a student.

On average, 20 students attended the HTSD program at Children of Peace School each year. Students in the HTSD program utilized a variety of communication methods. Some students exclusively used sign language, while others used hand gestures or speech. Still others might not have yet achieved this level of language development. The type and presence of a student's communication method did not affect admission to the school. Because the school had a partnership with two early intervention providers, the preschool student population was beginning to rise. Most of the two year-olds with hearing loss who received early intervention services through these providers transitioned to the HTSD program at the age of three.

Additionally, Children of Peace and the HTSD program provided morning transportation and afternoon care in order to support students and their families. Because the HTSD program drew from a large surrounding area, a van was provided for the transportation of students with disabilities and their siblings. Provided at no cost to families, the van transported students to school in the morning. Furthermore, the extended afternoon care was free of charge to parents of children who were deaf or hard-of-hearing as well as their siblings. A qualified teacher of the deaf was always present in the afternoon care program.

**Academic programming.** The overarching goal of the HTSD program was to include students with hearing loss in general education experiences to the maximum extent appropriate. All students were included in general education settings for music, art, and gym classes, as well as for lunch and recess. The HTSD program provided a continuum of services to students, with placement depending on their individual needs.

The self-contained classrooms included only students who were deaf or hard-of-hearing, and were taught by a qualified special education teacher of the deaf. The school had four self-contained classrooms: prekindergarten, primary (kindergarten through second grade), intermediate (third through fifth grade), and junior high (sixth through eighth grade). The prekindergarten classroom had one special education teacher and one classroom aide. The remaining classrooms had only one special education teacher per classroom.

Some students participated in general education classrooms for certain classes but also attended self-contained classes. For these students, the coordinator identified the student's strongest academic subject. The child was then included in a general education classroom for that subject, and then gradually included in additional general education classes. Usually, most students began with inclusion in general education classes for religion, science, or math.

Finally, inclusive placements were general education classrooms in which students in the HTSD program participated for the entire school day. At the time of this study, four of the 25 students in the HTSD program were fully included. Sign language interpreters would possibly be placed in inclusive classes to support the communication, understanding, and participation of students in the HTSD program. The HTSD coordinator and the parents facilitated the child's transition to full inclusion in general education classes throughout the school day.

Children of Peace School and the HTSD program also facilitated reverse-inclusion. Students who benefitted from language/reading instruction used in the self-contained classrooms possibly attended class with their peers with hearing loss. The language/reading instruction in the self-contained classrooms was delivered with a mixture of American Sign Language and Signed English. The instruction was very visual, relying on concrete methods such as diagramming and color-coding to teach syntax. For hearing students who were not responding to the reading instruction in the general education classrooms, a more visual approach was at times of particular benefit. Before a hearing student transitioned to the self-contained classroom, the program coordinator and parents met to agree on this placement. On average, students transitioned out of the self-contained classroom after two years.

Regardless of classroom placement, all students in the HTSD program received instruction based on the total communication approach. This kind of instruction used sign language, finger spelling, speech, lip-reading, and auditory training. Furthermore, each student may have received individualized speech instruction. Students may also have used assistive technology such as FM systems or specific computer programs to aid their communication.

**Social programming.** Social programs were offered at Children of Peace School to ensure that children with and without hearing loss could communicate and socialize with each other. For example, from preschool to third grade, each hearing student received sign language instruction on a weekly basis. Because students with hearing loss were always included in music, art, and gym classes, as well as lunch and recess, all students were familiar with sign language interpreters. Hearing students frequently acted as peer buddies to students with hearing loss. Additionally, the afternoon care program offered students with and without disabilities an opportunity to socialize after school.

The school's sports teams also included students with and without hearing loss. For both basketball and volleyball, coaches used sign language to

communicate with the players. The HTSD coordinator taught the coaches sport-specific signs. As additional support, the coaches modeled all of their instructions.

**Transition.** The coordinator of the HTSD program assisted parents and students in the transition to high school. When the student was in seventh grade, the program coordinator met with parents and students to discuss high school options. Chicago Public Schools had three high schools with programs for students who were deaf or hard-of-hearing. There were also two public suburban schools that specifically served individuals with hearing loss. The coordinator described the public school programs as well as the Illinois School for the Deaf for students who required sign language interpretation. Each of these programs used the total communication approach. Students who did not require sign language interpretation possibly attended a private high school. If the parents and students were interested in a private school, the coordinator contacted the private school to arrange for accommodations on the entrance exam. If a student was accepted to a private school, the coordinator assisted the school's staff to develop an appropriate service plan for the student.

**Outcomes.** Children of Peace School did not collect formal outcome data regarding its graduates. However, parent satisfaction had been documented in various media outlets. For example, a parent of a deaf student described her satisfaction with the program, commenting: "Before going to that school, I wouldn't even be able to sign to him 'Jesus' or 'pray.' There was no way for me to make him understand what I meant. Now he's learned so much about it. He's teaching us, too" (Pessin, 2005, p. 2).

### **Notre Dame College Prep**

**History.** In looking for an inclusive Catholic high school for their son with Down syndrome, two parents visited the Hand in Hand program at John Paul II High School in Nashville, Tennessee. Founded in 2004, Hand in Hand was an inclusive program for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The program was limited to five students with disabilities who were served by a full-time special education teacher and a part-time general education teacher. After visiting the school, the parents hoped to replicate the program at a Catholic high school near their home. After approaching many high schools, Notre Dame College Prep was the only private school in the area willing to consider developing a program to serve students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Established in 1955, Notre Dame College Prep was an all-boys Catholic high school located in a northern suburb of Chicago that enrolled over 800 students from Chicago and its surrounding suburbs. Prior to the development of the new program, Notre Dame College Prep had three instructional levels: Honors Program, College Prep Core, and the Brother Andre Program. The Honors Program (also known as the Hesburgh Scholars program) was intended for gifted students to excel not only in courses but also in service learning. The College Prep Core, intended to prepare students for college, was the curriculum in which most students participated. Finally, the Brother Andre Program also utilized a college prep core curriculum; however, the purpose of the Brother Andre Program was to help at-risk students, including students with learning disabilities, adjust to the expectations of a college preparatory school. As explicitly stated by Notre Dame College Prep, the program did not provide special education services.

After meeting with the parents, the principal and lead priest from Notre Dame College Prep visited the Hand in Hand program at John Paul II. During their visit, the Notre Dame College Prep staff met with several administrators, teachers, and the headmaster of John Paul II. As the lead priest stated, “After seeing the program in action, we were transformed. We went from ‘it’s a good thing’ to ‘it’s the right thing’” (Ramirez, 2009, p. 15). Upon their return, the Notre Dame College Prep administrators contacted Ann and Ed Burke. Ann was a dominant figure in Special Olympics, and Ed was a Chicago city alderman. Ann and Ed Burke agreed to fundraise for the program, which was later named the Burke Scholars Program, in their honor.

Over the course of the next year, the Notre Dame College Prep administrators developed the program. After posting a job announcement and interviewing candidates, Notre Dame College Prep hired a director for the program—the first special education teacher in the school. Only one student participated in the program in its first year. In 2010, because of increased enrollment, Notre Dame College Prep hired an additional special education teacher for the program.

**Funding.** The Burke Scholars Program received funding from various sources. The tuition of each Burke Scholar was the same as other Notre Dame College Prep students without disabilities. However, the parents of students in the Burke Scholars Program had certain fundraising responsibilities, including participating in an annual fundraiser. With an average of over 200 people in attendance, this annual event exclusively raised funds for the Burke Scholars Program. Additionally, Ann and Ed Burke provided private

funding for the program. The Burke Scholars Program also received IDEA federal funding. Such funding was used to provide speech and language support for the Burke Scholars, as well as technology (e.g., laptops).

**Description of students.** The Burke Scholars Program was restricted to male high school students with mild to moderate intellectual disability, including students with autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, and Down syndrome. In its first school year (2009–2010), the program served one student. In subsequent years, the program served four students (2010–2011), seven students (2011–2012), and nine students (2012–2013). Since 2010, the number of applicants has outweighed the number of students accepted to the program. Given limited space and support for incoming students, they introduced a screening process for applicants.

The screening of prospective students involved multiple components. The program director reviewed the student's Individualized Education Program and psychological evaluation. The program director also met with the student's family, and observed the student in his current elementary school environment. Furthermore, the student shadowed a current Notre Dame College Prep student for a full day. In order to be considered for acceptance, students had to demonstrate the following:

- The desire to grow closer to God by taking part in spiritual opportunities provided by the school;
- the willingness to follow the high behavioral standards of Notre Dame College Prep;
- proficiency in math and English equivalent to second-through-fifth-grade levels;
- an ability to work in group situations with minimal distraction to themselves and others;
- the skills necessary to initiate simple written and verbal expression; and
- the willingness to interact socially with students from all academic levels.

Students had to meet these criteria to be accepted into the Burke Scholars Program (Notre Dame College Prep, 2012).

**Academic programming.** The academic programming for each student included taking classes with their peers without disabilities. Students could take any of the following classes with their grade-level peers: Art, Biology, Health, Physical Education, Spanish, Studies in Comedy and Drama, Symphonic Band, Western Civilization, and World Geography. Additionally,

students could take classes related to the study of religion, including Ethics and Morality, Introduction to Catholicism, and Old Testament/New Testament. None of the students had aides in the general education classes. Instead, students in the Burke Scholars Program received accommodations and modifications designed by a special education teacher, as well as the support provided by other students in their classes.

In addition to the general education classes, all of the Burke Scholars participated in English, Math, and Life Skills/Study Hall taught by two special education teachers. Thus, for two to three of the six classes, the students were in self-contained classrooms. In these classes, the student-teacher ratio was 3:1. These classes were individualized based upon the needs of the students. Classes were designed to be interactive by using hands-on activities and cooperative learning techniques.

**Social programming.** In addition to academic programming, the Burke Scholars participated in various social events at Notre Dame College Prep. Each of the Burke Scholars participated in at least one school club (e.g., Spanish club, band, student council). Also, the Burke Scholars actively attended regular social events at the school, including after-school movies, dances, and football games. For all of these activities, the students participated alongside their peers without disabilities; no additional support (e.g., an aide) was provided.

Notre Dame College Prep also established the Burke Buddies Club. The club consisted of interested students without disabilities who wanted to develop friendships with the Burke Scholars. A teacher supervised the Burke Buddies Club. The student club officers, who were students without disabilities, coordinated activities and events with the Burke Scholars. For example, in 2011, the Burke Buddies Club spearheaded the “Spread the Word to End the R-Word” campaign, aligned with the national campaign sponsored by Best Buddies International. Through this campaign, the Burke Buddies Club members asked other Notre Dame College Prep students to pledge not to say the word “retarded.” Club members also distributed bracelets with the phrase “End the R-Word” to raise awareness about this issue and promote respect for people with disabilities. On a more regular basis, a typically developing student who participated in Burke Buddies would provide support to a Burke Scholar before or after school, or join a Burke Scholar in a social activity, such as eating lunch together.

**Transition.** Notre Dame College Prep graduated its first Burke Scholar in Spring 2013. This student attended the graduation ceremony alongside his



classmates without disabilities, and received a certificate of completion. The student began attending a postsecondary program for students with disability the following fall.

**Outcomes.** Because the program had only recently graduated its first student, little outcome data existed. However, it did seem that parents were satisfied with the program (Healy, 2013). Additionally, the program had garnered great interest from families in the area, as noted by the principal at Notre Dame High School: “The families have been finding us, sometimes years before [their children] go to high school” (Healy, p. 1). Further, he commented on the larger impact that the program had had on Notre Dame High School overall: “It’s been fun, it’s been interesting, it’s been challenging but I don’t think there’s anyone who wouldn’t say that it has made us a better place” (Healy, p. 1).

The Burke Scholars Program also had been discussed within the Archdiocese. The superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of Chicago commented, “The goal is to have something for people [with disabilities] within a geographical radius . . . that’s going to take a while to ramp up, but it’s a hope” (Healy, 2013, p. 2).

## Discussion

Due to the decentralization of Catholic schools, information about Catholic school programs that admit students with developmental disabilities is lacking. In our study, we provided examples of two programs for students with disabilities in primary and secondary Catholic schools. These two programs demonstrate the efforts of Catholic schools to become more inclusive. To conclude, we discuss implications for promoting inclusive Catholic education in terms of needed funding, participating students, future research, and inclusive programming.

### The Need for Funding

Obtaining needed funding is a critical factor in developing inclusive programs for students with disabilities in Catholic schools. While IDEA requires public schools to provide some federal funding to private schools, the amount is insufficient (DeFiore, 2006; Eigenbrood, 2010). Also, in certain states, there are voucher programs enabling students with disabilities to attend private, including Catholic, schools (e.g., the McKay Scholarship in Florida; Taylor, 2005). Both programs described in this study relied on tu-

ition and fundraising, with the HTSD program at Children of Peace School additionally supported by other funding sources. Other private schools may desire to replicate the successful funding strategies of HTSD and the Burke Scholars Program. It is important to note, however, that students with disabilities eligible for inclusion in Catholic schools must have families able and willing to pay the required tuition. For programs like HTSD, families of students with disabilities pay more tuition than families of students without disabilities. Concerned about the additional financial burden to the families of children with disabilities, some consider this unequal requirement to be problematic (Scanlan, 2008).

The issue of funding becomes even more complicated when considering that families of children with disabilities experience an increased risk for poverty (Emerson, 2007). Thus, families of students with disabilities in particular are likely to struggle with paying tuition and additional costs associated with attending a private school. Therefore, even if Catholic schools develop programs to support students with disabilities, financial barriers may preclude families from enrolling their children. Schools might begin to address this inequity by capitalizing on the generosity of donors and foundations that support the cause of inclusion in Catholic schools (Powell, 2004). For instance, the HTSD program received funding from both the Big Shoulders Fund and the Cardinal Stritch Foundation. Additionally, given that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has articulated a need for schools to better support students with disabilities, families, parishes, and schools may turn to bishops for leadership in fulfilling this goal.

The funding gap for Catholic schools may also be alleviated if public schools provide more funding. Although public schools must provide a proportionate amount of federal funding to students in nonpublic schools (e.g., Catholic schools), IDEA does not prohibit public schools from exceeding the proportionate amount. Indeed, public schools could provide Catholic schools with school personnel, property, equipment, or supplies as long as they benefit students with disabilities and do not provide direct financial benefits to the Catholic school (Russo, Osborne, Massucci, & Cattaro, 2011). While securing funding from the public school might be difficult, it might also be a viable option for developing inclusive programs in Catholic schools in some cases.

### **The Enrollment of More Marginalized Students**

The programs described in this study suggested two ways to support students with developmental disabilities in Catholic schools. Yet, these programs

continue to have entrance criteria that explicitly do not include all students with disabilities. For example, the admission criteria of the Burke Scholars Program state that students must exhibit (a) the willingness to follow the high behavioral standards of Notre Dame College Prep, (b) an ability to work in group situations with minimal distraction to themselves and others, and (c) the willingness to interact socially with students from all academic levels (Notre Dame College Prep, 2012). In keeping with the traditionally rigorous behavioral expectations of Catholic schools, these requirements raise an important question: How do Catholic schools include students with disabilities who exhibit challenging behaviors? Students with problem behaviors already face increased stigma (Osher & Osher, 2002), and are likely to be disproportionately excluded from private school settings.

Additionally, both programs described in this paper excluded students with the most significant support needs. The HTSD program did not admit students with a diagnosis of intellectual disability or autism spectrum disorder. The entrance criteria at Notre Dame College Prep required that admitted students have (a) proficiency in math and English equivalent to second-through-fifth-grade levels, and (b) the skills necessary to initiate simple written and verbal expression (Notre Dame College Prep, 2012). Students with extensive support needs do likely not have the communication and cognitive skills required for admission to this program. Similar to students who engage in challenging behaviors, students with extensive academic support needs are probably disproportionately excluded from private school settings. Further work is needed to truly welcome and include students who do not currently meet admissions criteria. The next step for these and other schools is to determine how they can expand their capacity to support students with more extensive support needs.

To serve all students with disabilities, further professional development is likely necessary for teachers and administrators in Catholic schools. Best practices in public schools, such as positive behavioral interventions and supports, can be incorporated into individual classrooms and school-wide to better support students who exhibit challenging behaviors. For students requiring individualized plans to decrease problem behavior and support appropriate behavior, teachers might need professional development on conducting functional behavioral assessments and developing behavior intervention plans. Such common strategies in public schools should be equally effective in supporting students with challenging behaviors in Catholic schools. However, professional development and technical assistance will be

necessary to support teachers and administrators in the correct understanding and implementation of such strategies.

### **Next Steps for Research**

To better understand and document the effectiveness of inclusive programs in religious and private schools, more research is necessary. This paper described two programs developed for students with developmental disabilities, including anecdotal information about program outcomes. Neither program had collected formal data about the outcomes of their respective programs. Though promising, information from this study and from the literature (Ault, 2010; Carter, 2007) is clearly limited. Future research should include classroom observations as well as interviews with a variety of involved stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, students with disabilities and their families, and peers without disabilities. By carefully investigating the perspectives and experiences of each of these stakeholder groups, researchers in this field will add much to the currently limited literature around inclusive programs in Catholic schools.

To advance knowledge around Catholic school programs, research on the effects of these programs is needed. More specifically, research must empirically document the effect of these programs upon the students with disabilities, their peers without disabilities, the school employees, and the families of the students with disabilities. Such research would not only document the supports necessary to provide an effective education, but also would identify the difficulties in developing a program for students with disabilities. Detailed documentation of the development and implementation of these programs is necessary for broader availability of inclusive programs across the United States.

### **Developing Inclusive Models**

To truly include students with disabilities, Catholic schools must provide effective supports, as well as academic and social programming. While Catholic schools are not required to grant admission to children with disabilities, their teachers and administrators might feel a moral responsibility to educate these students. Given the prolife stance of the Church, the stated support of the Bishops, and the values of Catholic Social Teaching, it is imperative that Catholic schools and other institutions provide support to individuals with disabilities and their families. Yet, if school officials feel compelled to serve

students with disabilities, then they must also put forth the resources, staff, and time needed to appropriately support these students (DeFiore, 2006). Without the support of church leaders and their communities, the status quo is likely to continue, making inclusive programs in Catholic schools few and far between.

The Children of Peace and Notre Dame College Prep communities are examples of how schools might begin to include students with disabilities—through the advocacy of families, the willingness of staff to include students with disabilities, the development of needed supports, and a commitment to inclusive practices. However, these models fall short of providing truly inclusive programming, as students with disabilities are still being placed in self-contained settings. Being educated, even just part of the school day, in a special education setting might restrict access to the general curriculum (Soukup et al., 2007) and peer models (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). By extending the work that has begun at Children of Peace and Notre Dame College Prep, Catholic schools can develop inclusive programming for students with developmental disabilities.

The importance of these and other existing models cannot be overstated. Similar to Notre Dame College Prep, which was modeled after an inclusive program in Tennessee, other Catholic high schools have developed inclusive programs after existing programs (e.g., Paul VI Catholic High School, Powell, 2004). However, because so few inclusive programs in Catholic schools exist, it may be difficult for those interested to locate inclusive programs nearby. In developing programs at both Notre Dame College Prep and Paul VI Catholic High School, school administrators and families traveled out-of-state to visit existing programs. The time and expense involved in such travel is not feasible for many families and Catholic school administrators.

In recent years, there have been increasing efforts to expand inclusive education in Catholic schools. In higher education, for example, Loyola University in Chicago has developed a four-course program culminating in a Certificate in Leading Inclusive Catholic Schools. Developed for Catholic school administrators, the certificate program is designed to build the capacity of Catholic schools to serve students with disabilities (for more information, see [www.luc.edu/education/endorsement/catholic-schools/](http://www.luc.edu/education/endorsement/catholic-schools/)). Likewise, providing a voice for parents and other advocates, the recently formed National Catholic Board on Full Inclusion provides resources to families and Catholic school professionals about strategies and research related to inclusion (for more information, see <http://fullinclusionforcatholicschools.org>).

Advances have been made on the legal front, as well, with cases questioning whether Catholic schools can exclude students with disabilities. Specifically, in Wisconsin, legal challenges have been made about the inability of students with disabilities to attend private schools through the use of vouchers (Mead, 2015). Thus, on several national fronts, the cause of inclusive education in Catholic schools is advancing.

Although illustrative of the ways in which children with disabilities may be included in Catholic schools, limitations of the current study should be noted. First, no teacher, parent, or administrator data were collected. Although this was purposeful, we understand that the lack of interview and observation data with other participants affects the nature of this study. Also, we did not member-check the manuscript with the teachers at each school. Additionally, no formal outcome data were collected for this study. Despite these limitations, by documenting two models of inclusive programs for students with disabilities in Catholic schools, we have added to the small literature available on this subject.

The desire to include students with disabilities in Catholic schools is being articulated by parents who want their children to receive a Catholic education alongside their siblings, cousins, and friends. It is echoed by past and present leaders in the Catholic Church who ask, "Will we turn aside those children with disabilities whose parents come requesting their admission into our facilities?" (Owen, 1997, p. 3). As demonstrated by Children of Peace School and Notre Dame College Prep, the efforts of parents, educators, and community members together can develop and sustain programs that accept and support students with disabilities within Catholic schools.

## References

- Ault, M. J. (2010). Inclusion of religion and spirituality in the special education literature. *The Journal of Special Education, 44*, 176–189. doi: [10.1177/0022466909336752](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466909336752)
- Bacon, J. K. & Erickson, K. E. (2010). Special education in Lutheran schools. *Journal of Religion, Disability, & Health, 14*, 355–367. doi: [10.1080/15228967.2010.517430](https://doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2010.517430)
- Bello, D. A. (2006). The status of special education services in Catholic high schools: Attributes, challenges, and needs. *Exceptional Children, 72*, 461–481.
- Bimonte, R. R. (2004). *Balance sheet for Catholic elementary schools: 2003 income and expenses*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- Brantlinger, E., Jimenez, R., Klingner, J., Pugach, M., & Richardson, V. (2005). Qualitative studies in special education. *Exceptional Children, 71*, 195–207.

- Buetow, H. A. (1970). *Of singular benefit: The story of U.S. Catholic education*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Buursma, D. R. (2010). Inclusion from the inside out. *Journal of Religion, Disability, and Health, 14*, 385–392. doi: [10.1080/15228967.2010.517440](https://doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2010.517440)
- Carlson, M. (2014). Aquinas on inclusion: Using the good doctor and catholic school teaching to build a moral case for inclusion in Catholic schools for children with special needs. *Journal of Catholic Education, 18*, 62–78. doi: [10.15365/joce.1801042014](https://doi.org/10.15365/joce.1801042014)
- Carter, E. W. (2007). *Including people with disabilities in faith communities: A guide for service providers, families, and congregations*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.
- Carter, E. W., & Kennedy, C. H. (2006). Promoting access to the general curriculum using peer support strategies. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 31*(4), 284–292. doi: [10.1177/154079690603100402](https://doi.org/10.1177/154079690603100402)
- Creswell, J. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Crowley, A. L. W., & Wall, S. (2007). Supporting children with disabilities in the Catholic schools. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice, 10*, 508–522.
- DeFiore, L. (2006). The state of special education in Catholic schools. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice, 9*, 453–466.
- Downing, J. E., & Eichinger, J. (2008). Rationale for inclusion. In J. E. Downing (Ed.), *Including students with severe and multiple disabilities in typical classrooms* (3rd ed., pp. 1–19). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.
- Downing, J. E., & Peckham-Hardin, K. A. (2007). Inclusive education: What makes a high quality education for students with moderate-severe disabilities? *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 32*, 16–30. doi: [10.2511/rpsd.32.1.16](https://doi.org/10.2511/rpsd.32.1.16)
- Durow, W.P. (2007). Including and serving students with special needs in Catholic schools: A report of practices. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice, 10*, 473–489.
- Eigenbrood, R. (2010). IDEA requirements for children with disabilities in faith-based schools: Implications for practice. *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health, 14*, 393–409. doi: [10.1177/10442073040150010101](https://doi.org/10.1177/10442073040150010101)
- Emerson, E. (2007). Poverty and people with intellectual disabilities. *Mental Retardation and Developmental Disability Research Reviews, 13*, 107–113. doi: [10.1002/mrdd.20144](https://doi.org/10.1002/mrdd.20144)
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Grossman, D., Morton, H. S., & Brooks, S. F. (2012). Adath Israel welcomes everyone! *TASH Connections, 38*, 19–20.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Healy, V. O. (2013, May 25). School said ‘hi’-special needs student took it from there. *Chicago Tribune*, pp. 1–2.
- Hunt, T. C., Joseph, E. A., & Nuzzi, R. J. (2002). *Catholic schools still make a difference: Ten years of research 1991–2000*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Education Association.
- Jaka, H. (2012). Growing up: Islam, my childhood, and disability. *TASH Connections, 38*, 16–17.
- Katz, J., & Mirenda, P. (2002). Including students with developmental disabilities in general education classrooms: Social benefits. *International Journal of Special Education, 17*, 26–36.

- Mead, J. F. (2015). Private in name only: A statutory and constitutional analysis of Milwaukee's private school voucher program. *Washington and Lee Journal of Civil Rights and Social Justice*, 21, 331–382.
- Merriam, S. B. (2001). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Notre Dame College Prep. (2012). Notre Dame College Prep Burke Scholars Program. Retrieved on November 8, 2012 from <http://www.nddons.org/s/1034/index.aspx?pgid=366&gid=1>
- Osher, T., & Osher, D. (2002). The paradigm shift to true collaboration with families. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 11, 47–60.
- Owen, M. J. (1997). Inclusion, the millennium, and Catholic education. *Momentum*, (August/September), 48–50.
- Pessin, J. L. (2005, January 28). A sign of achievement: New west side Catholic school helps deaf pupils succeed. *Chicago Tribune*, p. 2.
- Powell, M. A. (2004). Catholic high schools: Can inclusion work without significant publicly-funded resources? *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 8, 86–106.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Rafferty, Y., Piscitelli, V., & Boettcher, C. (2003). The impact of inclusion on language development and social competence among preschoolers with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 69(4), 467–479.
- Ramirez, M. (2009, February 9). Catholic school in Niles to become first in Illinois to offer special education program. *Chicago Tribune*, p. 15.
- Russo, C. J., Osborne, A. G., Massucci, J. D., & Cattaro, G. M. (2011). The legal rights of students with disabilities in Christian schools. *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 20, 254–280. doi: [10.1080/10656219.2011.626393](https://doi.org/10.1080/10656219.2011.626393)
- Scanlan, M. (2008). The grammar of Catholic schooling and radically “Catholic” schools. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 12, 25–54.
- Scanlan, M. (2009). Moral, legal, and functional dimensions of inclusive service delivery in Catholic schools. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 12, 536–552.
- Soukup, J. H., Wehmeyer, M. L., Bashinski, S. M., & Bovaird, J. A. (2007). Classroom variables and access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 74(1), 101–120. doi: [10.1177/001440290707400106](https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290707400106)
- Stainback, S., & Stainback, W. (1990). Inclusive schooling. In W. Stainback & S. Stainback (Eds.), *Support networks for inclusive schooling: Interdependent integrated education* (pp. 3–23). Baltimore, MD: Brookes.
- Stegink, P. (2010). Disability to community: A journey to create inclusive Christian schools. *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, 14, 368–381. doi: [10.1080/15228967.2010.517434](https://doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2010.517434)
- Strizek, G., Pittsonberger, J., Riordan, K., Lyter, D.M., & Orlofsky, G. (2007). *Characteristics of schools, districts, teachers, principals, and school libraries in the United States: 2003–2004 Schools and staffing survey (NCES 2006-313) Revised*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics.
- TASH. (2003). *TASH resolution on spirituality*. Baltimore, MD: Author.



- Taylor, S. S. (2005). Special education, private schools, and vouchers: Do all students get a choice? *Journal of Law and Education*, 34, 1–24.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (2002). *Catholic school children with disabilities*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://nccbuscc.org/education/fedasst/ideafinal.pdf>
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (2005). *Renewing our commitment to Catholic elementary and secondary schools in the third millennium*. Retrieved from <http://old.usccb.org/bishops/schools.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2007). *Private school participants in federal programs under the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/choice/private/index.html>

*Meghan Burke, Ph.D., BCBA-D, is an assistant professor of special education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Correspondence regarding this article can be sent to Dr. Burke at [meghanbm@illinois.edu](mailto:meghanbm@illinois.edu)*

*Megan Griffin, Ph.D., BCBA-D, is an assistant professor of special education at the University of New Mexico.*