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Story told by: Marc Mendez

Written by: Diana Mendez (Mother)

My name is Marc Mendez and I am currently 13 years of age. Before I begin with my journey, my mother and I collaborated and discussed how I feel about inclusion and what worked for me to provide the DOE with some feedback on inclusion, so she helped me put this letter together. When I was in 1st grade my mother was presented with a question... Would she consider inclusion for her son? I am glad that she agreed, because that decision would change the way I feel about school and its curriculum. My mother and teachers went along with the program for the first time in September of 2002. My experience with inclusion has been a very positive one. I just graduated from elementary school this year, and I decided to ask the SETTS teacher a week right before I was going to graduate, "why did she pick me to try the inclusion program back in 2002?"

The teacher mentioned that she saw something special in me but couldn't quite find the words; finally she used the word "potential", I will never forget that word. Please keep in mind that I had very limited speech and many inappropriate behaviors. For many years, my mother has always advocated for me and she struggled for 3 years to get me additional home-based services. These additional services helped me and my family with the progress I have made in school and in my community. Prior to entering 1st grade I received Early Intervention services from the time I was 18 months old. I will now be entering middle school. I am a student who is currently taking the English and Math city and state-wide tests. I will admit that it has been a struggle for me personally and academically. I continue to struggle with the school work but I have one goal in mind, and that is to one day become de-classified from Special Education. I also know that if this is not possible, I will continue to do my best and plan on trying to have a good quality of life.

The fact that I am in an inclusion class has helped me to realize this goal. Inclusion has motivated me to try even harder in school, looking back who would think that I would be able to sit in class with 30 students because when I started my special education curriculum, there were only 8 students and 2 teachers. It was so hard for me to relate with my school peers back then. I am very grateful to the DOE for having inclusion classrooms and we certainly need these classrooms all across America.

I feel that many people including the DOE should know that I would never have imagined that I would be graduating with general education students. I always knew I was different and I would notice and ask myself why was I in a class with my fellow class-mates who also struggled with the curriculum (I was in a Special Education school at that time), but because of inclusion, I did get the proper supports to help me get through my school day, these teachers consisted of, Early Intervention specialists and providers, General Education teachers, Para-professionals, as well as my SEIT and SETTS teachers. These professionals went beyond their job duties to ensure that I had the tools I needed to succeed in school. My family has also been able to watch me go from the tantrums I would have when we left for school to a young man who is now able to tolerate outings. There were so many years I was not able to join my family for breakfast, lunch or dinner or family gatherings and parties.

Social gatherings were a nightmare for my family, and I could see the embarrassment I caused to all of them. Inclusion has helped me to deal with other individuals and also has taught me the importance of interacting with the people around me. In the future I plan on advocating for myself and others. It has taken me 11 and ½ years of my life to get to a place where I am finally learning to accept my disability. I am hoping that when I graduate from high school, I can continue to go on to college, I have the DOE to thank and its inclusion program. The program has given me a chance to view my life and say to myself school is hard but I can master this without falling apart! I have seen the patience and commitment that has come from the teachers and my family. It is such a great feeling to be included in a class room where students and teachers accept my disability, I study the students in class, and they encourage me to work just as hard as they do.

I believe in myself and strive for a future that is filled with nothing but positive outlooks. I hope to also have my own apartment one day. I want to help those with disabilities to understand that with the right programs like inclusion, many students can have independent lives that are stable and filled with happiness. Being able to relate to my teachers, family and friends is what I had always wanted to achieve, it has been a goal of mine for many years and I now understand the importance of achieving this goal. I would not be where I am today with out inclusion, I hope that the DOE continues to open programs like these all over the world.

Best regards,

Marc Anthony Mendez

