Like special education, social inclusion is not a place. You cannot find it with a GPS or, for those less technologically inclined, on a paper map. It is not data-based, although there is a growing body of research and empirical findings in support of inclusion for students with disabilities. When you speak with classroom teachers in general education settings about inclusive education, lack of training and lack of administrative support are frequent commentaries. And when you review data from the U.S. Department of Education, it is clear that inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings has yet to be fully embraced by our nation’s public schools. Yet we know that inclusion in the general education classroom is an important tactic, albeit imperfectly implemented, for social inclusion.

In my experience, having a special “program” for inclusion—and these programs are usually accompanied by uplifting, inspiring or clever names and acronyms—is not enough to truly include children with disabilities in school. Social inclusion, rather, is a series of values, ideas, opportunities, and interpersonal transactions that are part of building social capital for all students and for all members of the school community. The two major classifications of social capital are 1) bonding, which is a result of close personal relationships, built on interactions and trust, and 2) bridging social capital, which includes those relationships across boundaries. Bonding social capital is a framework I use when I witness Special Olympics athletes participating with others who do not share their disability.

Loneliness is a disability in and of itself. And social inclusion is, in part, an antidote to loneliness. Sports are a vehicle to enhance social inclusion. And Special Olympics is all about sports.

When it comes to effective inclusion, there remains a lot to be learned about what is working effectively and what is not. But there is enough evidence of its positive impact for all students to keep going, and to learn as we go. We must employ tools that measure social inclusion and community participation for all students with disabilities. And we need additional tools and strategies to make inclusion for all students possible. Special Olympics is one such tool to move the promise of social inclusion to a reality.

Sports have a unique place in American culture, especially for young people. For young children, play is said to be the purest form of learning. As children enter school, play remains important, but free and unstructured play begins to be

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teamwork, competition and meeting goals, exceeding one’s past performance, and setting a new “personal best” are shared by all who participate in athletics. Sharing gains, enjoying practice, struggling to increase mastery of a skill—these are the common denominators of all athletes, not just for those with disabilities.

Sports offer multiple pathways to social inclusion, including:

- a sense of pride, which can enhance children’s resilience to the prejudice they often face and may help give them the courage to join a friendship—because people feel they have things to bring to the friendship;
- shared interests with other children; and
- contact with linked success through a team where the successes and challenges of each team member is shared.

Each of these is important by itself. Taken as a whole they are a powerful force for including all students, including those with intellectual disabilities, in the real life of a school.

While doing the research for this article I received an email—unrelated to the article—from Special Olympics Chairman and CEO Tim Shriver. The content of the email is not relevant, but the footer on Tim’s signature is… “The Special Olympics Movement: If you are a fan of joy, courage, and the human race, then you are already a fan of Special Olympics.” It is that attitude that has caused Special Olympics to be a worldwide movement that is growing each year. It is that baseline assumption that people with intellectual disabilities are full members of the human race and, through sports, will become competitors, athletes, friends, and teammates. But it is not only sports that cause people around the globe to support Special Olympics. Social inclusion is a big part of the reason, as well. Sports are a natural vehicle for social inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities.

“Sports offer individuals with intellectual disability the opportunity to grow as part of a team as well as set, reach, and surpass individual goals. These are moments shared by everyone as part of the human experience.” I found this statement in a file on my computer at the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation, and tracked it to Ericka Hagensen, who is now a policy advocate with The Arc of North Carolina. She happens to have cerebral palsy and a graduate degree in social work. She goes on to say, “A broad range of programs, activities, and opportunities are needed to meet the emotional, spiritual, and physical needs of individuals with intellectual disabilities and their...
families. We’ve learned this not from parents and teachers, but from individuals with disabilities themselves who say, ‘I want to try…I can do…I have an interest in…’. Our movement will be a success while they continue to be our teachers.”

Special Olympics sprung from the fertile mind of its founder, Eunice Kennedy Shriver. I had the honor of working for her full time from 1993-97, and, as was her habit, I have never really stopped working for her though the world lost her in 2009. When you are around people of great zest, passion, commitment, and the incredible ability to get things done, it is infectious. And fortunately for so many of us, our unwavering commitment lingers long after we encountered her.

Special Olympics, and all the programs under its umbrella, are not only sporting events and sports training. While sports competition and training are at the core of what Special Olympics is as an organization, Special Olympics is more than just that. Special Olympics is a tool to include students in the life of the school and, indeed, in the life of the community. And inclusion in education is important.

Inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities is increasingly shown to enhance the educational experience of all students—yet at the same time, it is becoming less and less the norm for those same students. For a good summary of the research see “Including Students with Developmental Disabilities in General Education Classrooms: Educational Benefits” by Jennifer Katz and Pat Mirenda.1 We also know that inclusion, by itself is a tool to enhance friendship, but is no guarantee. Luanne Meyer spent five years studying “The Impact of Inclusion on Children’s Lives: Multiple Outcomes, and Friendship in Particular.” She and her team interviewed individuals in four states, in urban, suburban and rural environments. Meyer discusses six “frames of friendship”: 1) best friend; 2) regular friend; 3) just another child; 4) I’ll help; 5) inclusion child; and 6) ghost or guest.3 We all want all children to have peers who are Best friend, Regular friend or Just another child. All six of these classifications occur at different times, in different places. One of the conclusions of the research for children with significant disabilities, was that there were few times when others named such children as Best friend, Regular friend or Just another child. Clearly, there is a long way to go. But as Meyer notes, we do not need any more research to know that having friends is a good thing and is desirable for all students.

We have worked tirelessly to have students included in regular schools and regular classes, and are certainly not calling it quits. Part of the reason for these past efforts is friendship, as cited above. Another reason is that inclusion works and benefits all children, both academically and socially. It’s not that children with disabilities are not, cannot, and should not be friends with other children with disabilities. Of course they can, and should be, and are. But it is hard to dispute the desirability of children with disabilities and those without disabilities being friends and interacting, socializing, and playing both in school and out.

We know from multiple studies that loneliness is a big issue for adults with disabilities. Making friends in school is, in part, a protective factor against adult loneliness.

Including Special Olympics, in all its various forms, for all ages of students, is an approach that schools can use to enhance the social capital of all students. Engaging the school community in Special Olympics may assist in combating loneliness and, due to the extraordinary level of volunteerism associated with Special Olympics, enhance a school’s ties to the communities they serve. By itself, Special Olympics cannot overcome all barriers faced by children with intellectual disabilities. But it can be a vital part of a school’s strategy to help every child learn, however they learn, and at whatever rate they learn.

As the Special Olympics slogan proclaims: “Be a Fan.” I am. ■

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