

## *Reflections from Syracuse*

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### **Kate Small, Oak Park:**

In August, myself and a number of district employees had the opportunity to attend the Summer Leadership Institute at Syracuse University. This conference was rooted in leading inclusive schools and committed to bettering educational practice to meet the unique needs of all students.

The theme of this conference was "Lighting a Candle (Instead of Cursing the Dark)," inspired by a saying that originated as a Chinese proverb and has since been quoted by politicians and activists around the world. As I reflected on this theme and how it relates to my work, I was reminded of another quote attributed to Edith Wharton. The quote reads: "There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it." Each day at Oak Park I am fortunate enough to spend time in classrooms where students of all cognitive abilities, academic levels, and personal experience are greeted by teachers who care about their needs as well as their hopes and dreams. I see teachers problem solving in the moment, reflecting on their practice to modify instruction, and vowing to "start fresh" with some of their most challenging students each and every day. While sometimes it is important to act as a candle lighting the way for others along the path of Specially Designed Instruction, I find that my greatest role is to serve as a mirror, reflecting and sharing the creativity, flexibility, and compassion of the amazing educators that I have the privilege to work with.

During the Summer Leadership Institute we were introduced to a number of adults who have spent their lives fighting to be included in schools, universities and communities across the country. Hearing their stories reminded me of the ultimate purpose of all of our hard work. As educators, we have the ability to change the mindset of the next generation, providing daily examples that everyone belongs, everyone has self-worth, and everyone has the right to a world class education.

### **Melissa LeStrange, Gwyn Nor:**

This summer I attended the Syracuse Inclusion conference. The focus of the conference emphasized the positive benefits intertwined with inclusive education. This was represented through narratives from adults, college students, and peers who were able to excel in both their personal and academic lives because of the opportunities and resources provided to them through inclusion. The quote, "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness" can have many interpretations. The reality is that change can require work and initially feel overwhelming and challenging. However, despite this "darkness", one must focus on the positive outcomes that result from change. Each day I see the benefits my students receive because of inclusive instruction. Not only is the teaching more accommodating with the support of my co-teacher and staff, but I can personally see that my students have built strong and diverse relationships. Furthermore, all my students have a sense of belonging and are valued members of the classroom. Seeing the positive reactions my students have with one another is the light that drives me to provide a positive and strong inclusive teaching environment.



### **Debbie Morgan, Bridle Path:**

The inclusion team that went to Syracuse was a wonderful bunch of people. To be surrounded by others that believe in the same ideas is a very powerful, motivating, and uplifting experience. Our time together was spent listening to speakers, building each other up with positivity, and sharing our thoughts and ideas. I learned strategies for presuming competence, and witnessed an outstanding co-teaching team! It was most beneficial, and I was proud to be one of the invited guests of the North Penn School District to tag along. Thank you very much for such an opportunity.

**Maria Stratton, North Wales:**

The Inclusive Conference in Syracuse this summer opened my heart and eyes once again to my dream job, my self-selected career, of educating the minds of the future. Some words of wisdom I'd like to share with you for the upcoming school year are below.

We, first and foremost, need to recognize that our job is to be a preeminent teacher. It is important to live and work with integrity, doing our best to serve our children and always put them first. Without this, the light within us won't be given much opportunity to shine forth.

Please get to know your students and families. We need to know our students and their families before we can really educate them. Find their strengths, learn their weaknesses. Build their learning off their strengths to reduce their weaknesses. Make them realize how successful they are and can be. Pave the path of their futures by finding their inner light and helping them make it shine through. I've found that taking a personal interest in my students goes a long way towards opening their doors and letting the light shine through.

During the conference, I recognized WE are **ALL** called to be the light in our schools. To be that light, we need to make a difference every day, anyway we can. We will never relive today again, so make every day count. We can control our attitudes, and our attitudes determine our direction of being the light or the darkness.

What good is a light that does not shine? Light has one purpose, to put out darkness. Imagine sitting in a large room in complete darkness. If one person lit a candle, everyone would see. The light of one small candle, can eliminate the darkness of a room. **Be that light.** It does not take much to light a candle. Imagine if all lit their candles!

*I challenge you to find the positive, the light, in every situation you encounter throughout this year!*

**Cara Weinberg, Bridle Path/York Avenue:**

When analyzing this quote, darkness has been a longtime metaphor for ignorance throughout history. Similarly, light symbolizes hope and fosters acceptance turning something that maybe once was viewed as negative, into something that is positive. In a time where so much negativity is a constant in the world around us, it's time to light our candles and focus on what's good and what is fair for our students in North Penn School District.

Inclusive practices allow for our students with disabilities to get what they need amongst their peers. They are no longer shunned to another classroom because of a label from an evaluation report that indicates they may need to learn differently. They no longer need to be segregated into a separate classroom because they are "slow learners" or "don't have the ability like the other students." This IS the CURSE of the DARKNESS. Instead, let's IGNITE our CANDLES and bring LIGHT to these students. Let's show them we believe they are worthy of being in our classrooms and learning alongside their peers. Let's focus on their strengths to build their weaknesses so they can be the best students they can. Let's show typically developing students how they can be leaders by embracing and accepting every single person for who they are, regardless of differences. We are all humans and we all deserve a chance....if only we keep our candles lit. I am North Penn Proud and incredibly excited to be demolishing society's stigma of individuals with disabilities. It's time to focus on the light...after all, fire spreads quickly.

