



A Playbook of Love: A Journey of Full Inclusion at Pope John Paul II



A Mission in Motion

For a Catholic school, the idea of full inclusion is more than just a pedagogical goal; it is the fulfillment of a mission to serve all of God's children. But as any educator knows, the step from alluring idea to daily practice requires a bridge of preparation, prayer, and profound bravery.

Our journey began when Ayuni first visited our school at age three. She was a bundle of energy and joy. While her speech patterns were still developing, her spirit was unmistakable. After reflecting on her needs and our own resources, we made the decision: Ayuni would join our Pre-K 4 program the following year.

We had one year to prepare. We didn't realize then that this year of preparation would transform more than just a classroom; it would transform our entire perspective on what it means to teach.

A Whirlwind of Preparation

As Principal, Patricia Tarquinio knew that opening the door was only the first step. Inclusion isn't a policy; it's a practice that requires a dedicated team. She entrusted Ayuni's arrival to Nikki Stewart, a resourceful educator often described as a "human Swiss Army knife."

We spent the year immersing ourselves in the "how" of inclusive education through three specific pillars:

- Research: We studied how students with Down Syndrome learn best and explored evidence-based approaches for neurodivergent learners.
- Collaboration: We met regularly with Ayuni's family and her Behavioral Health Technician (BHT) to ensure her transition was seamless.
- Observation: We visited fellow Archdiocesan schools that had successfully welcomed students with similar needs to see inclusion in action.

Yet, despite the checklists, a quiet trepidation grew within Nikki. As a teacher who prides herself on dependability, her deepest fear wasn't about the logistics or the lesson plans. It was a simple, profound question: What if I'm not good at this? What if I fail her?

Love Names the Fear

That fear, while heavy, dissolved in a single morning. In May, Nikki visited Ayuni at her current school. The moment they met, the "program" vanished, and the child appeared. It was love at first sight.

Nikki realized her anxiety wasn't about a lack of preparation; it was about the weight of wanting to give Ayuni, and her nineteen classmates, the very best version of herself. When she confessed this to Patricia, the Principal offered a simple, necessary advice: "Give yourself grace." It was a lesson Nikki was still learning, but it was the exact fuel she needed for the journey ahead.

The Playbook of Love

When the school year finally began, the "perfect method" didn't come from a textbook, a seminar, or a podcast. It came from the student herself. Ayuni became the mentor. She provided the playbook we had been searching for, and the instructions were simple: Lead with love.

Ayuni's boundless affection lit a fuse in the classroom. Without a single word of instruction, the other nineteen children began to respond with incredible gentleness and empathy. They weren't just following a teacher's example; they were responding to the "magic" of a peer who lives entirely without judgment.



A Community Transformed

Today, the rigorous preparation we did has benefited our entire Early Childhood Department. But the true gift is spiritual. Ayuni reminds us daily to strip away the distractions that adults use to complicate life. She is a messenger of the goodness that lies within all of us.

We are blessed beyond measure to be part of Ayuni's story. We have navigated the "glitches" of the first few weeks by working as a unified team, and we are already looking forward to a morning nine years from now: the day we hear Ayuni's name read from the altar as she graduates from the 8th grade.

Until then, we will keep following Ayuni's lead, remembering that when we lead with love, we are never far from Heaven.