

NEWS / LOCAL NEWS

Porto Charities hopes all schools will include comprehensive special education

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People with intellectual disabilities already are welcomed at five diocesan schools, but a nonprofit organization hopes all diocesan schools will provide comprehensive special education services.

Leo Alonso, founder of Porto Charities, said that interest in the organization is growing. The nonprofit, which assists people with developmental disabilities through fundraising, resources, assistance and education, has met with numerous officials at schools from Ashburn to Springfield.

“Porto Charities helps both in terms of funding and in raising awareness of the needs of students with intellectual disabilities,” said Jennifer Bigelow, diocesan superintendent of schools. “The funds are essential to help start and grow new programs at schools as well as resources that can be shared diocesan-wide. Their work creates a greater awareness of the needs in our diocese. We are called to provide a Catholic education to all that want one and their efforts help make that possible.”

“The Catholic Church teaches the dignity of all human persons,” said Bishop Michael F. Burbidge in a video promoting Porto Charities. “All persons are made in the image and likeness of God, so the Catholic Church is always looking for ways to serve pastorally and spiritually the children entrusted to our care.”

Five Arlington diocesan schools already have comprehensive special education services or programs: Bishop O’Connell High School in Arlington, Paul VI Catholic High School in Fairfax, Saint John Paul the Great Catholic High School in Dumfries, Holy Spirit Catholic

School in Annandale and St. Mark Catholic School in Vienna.

Porto Charities board member Bill Dalgetty said there needs to be an education process with parish pastors and principals to help them see that inclusion of children with developmental disabilities is a responsibility. “The vision of the church is that it should provide education for Catholic children,” he said. “Our goal should be to carry out that vision.”

Dalgetty said school officials are sometimes concerned about the cost of establishing a program in their schools. “To establish an inclusion program in elementary schools means there is a need to hire a teacher qualified to help students with disabilities,” he said. “There’s always a resistance, and you have to have training for teachers and staff, and teach how to interact and include students.”

Porto Charities provides the funding that allows schools to offer these programs, which make a difference for both parents and students.

Meg Grattan’s son, Thomas, is a sophomore in O’Connell’s expanded services program.

“The inclusive nature of the program has allowed him to develop lasting and meaningful peer relationships and has exposed him to a strong level of academics he would never have been able to access in a different high school setting,” she said.

Mia Brilliant, a junior at John Paul the Great, said she learned by volunteering as a mentor that something small, such as finishing a worksheet or a smile in the hallway, can mean more than being the best in the class or the star athlete.

St. Mark was the first diocesan elementary school to offer a program for students with intellectual disabilities. Principal Darcie Girmus said there are five students in the Evangelist Program. “It helps all of our students and teachers learn compassion, empathy and respect for the human person,” she said.

The Options Program at John Paul the Great gives students a sense of belonging, according to Options teacher Connie Spadafore. “A student from Options was homecoming queen this year, and once a month another student will go to the track meets of an Options student,” she said. “It goes beyond the academic component.”

Spadafore has advice for those on the fence about starting a program at their schools. “It doesn’t take much — two teachers, staff and administration willing to take it on,” she said. “Everything else falls in place really easily.”

Find out more

Contact Porto Charities at info@portocharities.org or watch the video.

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