

TOGETHER WE LEARN BETTER

STORY
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Through the Better Together initiative launched in schools across the Diocese of Cleveland, incorporating fundamental change into the Catholic school community has created flourishing environments that not only benefit exceptional learners but allow for every student to be engaged. Educators are investing in the art of customizing plans that develop both exceptional and gifted students as a cohesive unit.

An exceptional learner is a student that learns and develops differently. Such a student may need instruction that accommodates his or her preferred learning style, a different pace of instruction or additional educational services in order to progress learning.

Last spring, principals, teachers and intervention specialists began professional development sessions every other month that guided staff to understand exceptional students' needs. Through instructional series that provided tangible materials for the school day, collaborative sessions with county resources and special education awareness initiatives, schools are better prepared to serve students with diverse learning needs.

"Our most recent data indicate that we have 2,219 students identified with exceptional learning needs enrolled in our diocese," said Molly Bullock, special education coordinator for schools in the Office of Catechetical Formation and Education.



Parents of exceptional learners can view the complete list of Better Together schools and learn more by visiting dioceseof-cleveland.org/bettertogether. The Alleluia Ball supports the Better Together initiative in Catholic Education. Visit Catholic-Community.org/alleluia for more information on the gala.

Through Better Together, which was launched with funds raised through the generosity of donors at the 2017 Alleluia Ball, schools have established a safe and acceptable place where students learn using tools that uniquely fit. An example is flexible seating or sensory aids. A student may learn better when provided with various seating options like a padded cushion or standing desk. A student who is sensitive to sound may have improved focus when provided with noise-canceling headphones.

"When inclusive practices are not successfully implemented, an exceptional learner may experience anxiety, confusion and frustration. Thus a classroom is not adequately supporting the individual's learning needs," Bullock said.

"Our Catholic faith calls us to serve one another in community, with each person being an important and contributing member. Better Together is helping our schools support students so that an expanding number of families are able to receive a Catholic education," Bullock added.

CLEVELAND CENTRAL CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL, CLEVELAND

The Better Together initiative developed diocesan-wide guidelines that support a consistent framework for schools. Cleveland Central Catholic provides targeted interventions that assist students with goal setting and organizational skills.

ST. JUDE SCHOOL, ELYRIA

The Better Together team at St. Jude's consists of intervention specialists, speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists and applied behavior analysis therapists. The staff has taken coursework in fostering creativity in the classroom, effective strategies for working with students on the autism spectrum, effective co-teaching, dyslexia and how to motivate unmotivated students.

INCARNATE WORD ACADEMY, PARMA HEIGHTS

Incarnate Word Academy has redesigned its response to intervention program (known as RTI) under the Better Together program. This process identifies students and implements interventions for grades K-8. The intervention specialist meets with grade level teachers to review instructional approaches and best practices for students' needs. Teachers receive digital documentation and a traveling suitcase that serves as a toolkit of resources for students identified with specific educational needs.

HOLY TRINITY, AVON

Knowing that each student has varied strengths and unique learning needs is a blueprint for instruction at Holy Trinity. Applying differentiation, teaching the material through a variety of instructional strategies, is a responsive tool that helps maximize class time and meet student's needs. †



"Ace is a fourth-grade student who has been with us since preschool. In the years that Ace has been a part of our school, he has shown growth both socially and academically. He has participated in a variety of social groups during and after school. This helps build his confidence and social skills."
-Cassandra Zacharias, intervention specialist, St. Jude School



Sister Allison Marie, principal of Cleveland Central Catholic: "The Better Together initiative has provided significant professional development for educational leaders and inclusion coordinators as a foundation for providing special education services that accommodate the needs of a diverse student population."

"Holy Trinity has embraced the Better Together initiative in a way that is natural for our school and our school community's Catholic faith. By carefully studying best practices and committing to differentiated instruction, it is our hope that we can give all of our students what they need to be successful in the classroom."

-Kim Kuchta and Michael Modzeleski, co-principals



"As we embrace the Better Together initiative, I want to bring everything possible to our teachers and students. The biggest component to successful implementation is everyone working together to achieve the same goal. In order to do this, fluid and consistent communication between teachers and staff is essential. Throughout the implementation of differentiation and the response to intervention process, I continuously see a difference in the approach made in lesson planning."
-Kailyn Koberling, intervention specialist, Incarnate Word Academy