

April 12, 2023: Newton School Committee Meeting

To the Newton School Committee, Mayor Fuller and the Newton City Council

The Newton Commission on Disability (COD) has voted unanimously to express our strong support for the Understanding our Differences (UOD) program in the Newton Public Schools, and to request that the program be continued in the coming school year.

Understanding our Differences has provided Newton students with a greater awareness and understanding of the lives of people living with disabilities in our community for 45 years. It is not an exaggeration to say that generations of Newton residents have been positively impacted by this program, from young children who learn how to include a classmate with disabilities in their playground games, to adults who appreciate the greater understanding in the general community. Many members of the COD, including both co-chairs, have been volunteers with UOD over the years, and have seen the benefits firsthand for ourselves and our children. We are very proud to live in a city where such a comprehensive program exists in our schools.

The word “understanding” in the name of the program is critically important. We are teaching our children not just to tolerate people who are different, but giving them a greater understanding of what it’s like to live with a disability. A child who learns about people who are blind will not be surprised by someone with a white cane and will know not to try to pet a working service animal. A child who asks questions in an UOD session on physical disabilities may ask a classmate in a wheelchair to join in a game. A child who learns about intellectual disabilities will learn to not use hurtful language, and not to tolerate the bullying of a classmate. All of these lessons benefit all children, whether they have disabilities or not. All of these lessons make our schools and the Newton community more genuinely inclusive.

Newton is a strongly pro-inclusion district, and most of our students with disabilities are educated in the general education classroom environment. How can we expect our students to understand and include their classmates with disabilities automatically, without support and discussion? If we truly value equity and inclusion, we need to teach it to our students, and the Understanding Our Differences program gives that opportunity.

The intrinsic benefits of the UOD program go far beyond the classroom. The students and their families learn how to incorporate this information, and this attitude of inclusion, into their lives as adults. They will, for example, have a better understanding of accessibility and will know not to block a curb cut in the sidewalk, or park in a disability-accessible space, not only to avoid a ticket, but because it is the right thing to do. We are teaching our children that those with disabilities are not “other” because they may be different from what we are familiar with. We are teaching generations of Newton residents that those who may have differences are “us”, as much a part of the Newton community as anyone.

The Commission on Disability understands that some families with an autistic child would like to see changes in the curriculum for this disability. This may be a more difficult lesson to develop, because autistic people can have such a wide variety of needs and behaviors. We understand that the

Understanding Our Differences program has been very willing to work with Newton families to address their concerns, and we support these ongoing efforts to improve the curriculum.

However, we strongly urge that the many benefits to the Understanding Our Differences program in increasing the understanding of ten different disabilities not be discarded because of curriculum issues in any one session.

We ask that Mayor Fuller and the Newton School Committee reconsider the importance of the Understanding our Differences program and restore it to the budget.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Eileen Sandberg, Co-Chair

Ima Jonsdottir, Co-Chair

Newton Commission On Disability