



Students of Need Find a Friend in James Cullen of GRACE Catholic Schools

Ladder of Success

On a chalkboard next to James Cullen's desk, he keeps a handmade "thank you" card from a young girl. As you open the cover, with its bright red heart and blue and yellow dots, you are treated to a spectacle of rainbow stripes and a heartfelt message in childish scrawl. It says: "Dear Mr. Cullen, Thank you for helping me learn to read (the period is missing here) Have a good summer!" . . . It's the kind of card which most elementary school teachers accumulate over the years. However, for Cullen, who serves as Director of Student Services for the GRACE schools, such a message has added significance. Cullen's entire work life is devoted to serving as an advocate for "students of need", those who may have academic, behavioral, social or physical challenges and also those who are "higher achieving" and benefit from extra challenges. The "thank you" card came as a result of working for a year on reading and math skills with a child who is now in first grade. "A lot of times, parochial schools are thought to serve (just) a particular kind of student," observed Cullen, who has been with the GRACE (Green Bay Area Catholic Education) schools for two years now. "We need to open up our arms and our doors to all students as God would want us to do." Cullen has drawn attention for his innovative ideas which are benefiting students in all 10 of the GRACE schools, which range from just Pre-K to Pre-K through fifth grade and Pre-K through eighth grade, and are located from Green Bay to De

Pere, West De Pere and Howard-Suamico. One popular idea has involved developing individualized service plans, or learning approaches, for each of some 300 students of need. The plans all use the same language and form for ease of reference (which is quite unique). Each trimester, every plan is reviewed, the student's progress is evaluated and adjustments are made as indicated in goals and methods for the next trimester. The plans might address anything from focusing on social skills for an autistic child, to using calming methods for a



child with behavioral challenges, or helping a child struggling in reading or math to use an online Odyssey program for remedial instruction. Each school has a "supportive consultant" who serves as a link between the school and Cullen, helping to coordinate these individualized plans. Cullen, who has spent some 15 years working in public schools, followed by another five years in Catholic education, notes that the excellent staff with whom he works in the GRACE schools play a big part in allowing the system to remain on the "cutting edge" of education for students of need. "We have highly qualified teachers," Cullen suggested. "We can meet the needs of the vast majority of students who would qualify for

special education in public schools. Our education can be equal to if not better than public schools! It's not necessarily what you have (in terms of resources). It's what you DO with what you have. The parochial schools have a lot to offer. He recounts one incident of an unnamed mother in the GRACE system who received test results, indicating that her son was autistic. "She burst into tears and asked, 'Can my child still stay at this school?,'" Cullen recalled. "I told her, 'Yes, we'll put together a plan!' She was so grateful." Cullen would like to extend this type of special opportunity for children of need throughout the 61 schools and between 10,000 and 11,000 students in the Green Bay Diocese. "I would like to envision it as being taken Diocese-wide," he said. "We're providing a valuable service to children of need. We're making a difference. I'm an advocate for them. At the end of the day, that's what it's all about."

Submitted by Special Projects
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Fundraisers

- ◆ February 1: St. Thomas More - International Night
- ◆ February 16: Resurrection - Auction

Contact the individual school for more information about an event.