

4/14/10
Public Comment

Hi everyone, my name is Eli Cornblath, and I am a Junior at Ann Arbor Pioneer High School. Originally I signed up to speak because I understood that there was a plan to cut the Peer Mentoring program at Forsythe. I was happy to hear today that it's being reinstated, but I just wanted to talk a little bit about how valuable the program is and what it meant to me. For those of you who don't know, Peer Mentoring is a program where the P.E. teacher Ms. Bert gives able-bodied students the opportunity to help and learn from kids with disabilities. The able-bodied students are the Peer Mentors, and they are grouped together in the same advisory so they can learn about various disabilities and the best ways to help each Mentee. The program was really valuable to me because it brought together a very diverse group of students that had to work together not only to help the Mentees, but to overcome their stereotypes about students with disabilities. I think that before the program, most of the Mentors were a little scared to have to deal with kids who were less physically or emotionally able than they were, but by the end of the year, all of the Mentors were very comfortable with the Mentees and were capable of assisting any Mentee in the class. A lot of my friends who were mentors couldn't be here tonight because of other obligations, but since all of us 7th grade have gone on to stay involved in community service of all kinds, and the program has impacted the way that we view and treat students who are different from us, as well as the way that we treat each other. Being a part of the Peer Mentoring program was an experience that I will never forget, and I'm really grateful for all of the work that Ms. Bert has done to continue teaching initially close-minded students how to relate to other students who seem different than they are. Thank you very much.

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak here tonight.

My name is Mary Duerksen.

I have two daughters who are graduates of Pioneer High School, a son at Forsythe Middle School, and a daughter at Dicken Elementary.

I am here to highlight the Peer Mentoring class at Forsythe Middle School. My son, who is a student

in the Hearing Impaired classroom, and students from the Cognitively Impaired classroom attend Physical Education alongside their typical peers who have applied to be Peer Mentors as an elective.

This class was developed by and is taught by Ms. Kelli Bert.

The 7th graders are educated about various disabilities by Ms. Bert. Then, they have hands-on experience with their peers who have special needs in the PE setting. The mentors work with the students with special needs by providing guidance and support during the class.

As you know, the inclusion of children with disabilities in general education classes is the goal

of IDEA. My son has mainstreamed for other electives with his 6th grade peers, but those classes haven't allowed for his interaction with them as does the Peer Mentoring class. This class has given my son the opportunity to build relationships with many 7th graders in the building. The social interaction required in that class challenges both sets of students to know each other. Their interactions are authentic.

Many studies on peer mentoring between students with special needs and students from the general education population have proven the benefits.

Some are:

- 1) it stimulates age-appropriate social interactions for the special needs student groups

- 2) it provides appropriate role models for the special needs students

- 3) it promotes self-esteem for all students from both groups

- 4) it promotes greater empathy for all children by the peer mentors

- 5) it increases tolerance and acceptance for children with special needs by the peer mentors

I commend the Ann Arbor Public Schools for providing this class to the students at Forsythe Middle School. It demonstrates what our community is. I know that there are many former students of Ms. Bert's who have grown into adulthood with this experience playing a part in the attitudes they developed. I look forward to my son living and working in an accepting community with people who are comfortable with those who are different.

Beyond living in a diverse Ann Arbor, these students have truly learned how to live in a diverse community.

I applaud the administrators who support Peer Mentoring in Ann Arbor Public Schools and thank them for their efforts to provide it to as many students as possible.