Dear Newton Families, Colleagues, and Community Members

Special Olympics turns 50 this year and with a new exhibit, the Smithsonian Institution is highlighting how athletics have helped to dramatically change the lives of people with intellectual disabilities over the last 5 decades. Special Olympics changed attitudes about the abilities and talents of children and adults with intellectual disabilities at a time when people with disabilities were often institutionalized and marginalized.

According to the press release, the new exhibit “showcases how Eunice Kennedy Shriver evolved a backyard camp for young people with intellectual disabilities into Special Olympics, which hosted its first international games in 1968 in Chicago.” Today it has a membership of 5 million athletes from 172 countries.
The Smithsonian display also features the stories of four well-known Special Olympics athletes — Marty Sheets, Ricardo Thornton, Lee Dockins and Loretta Claiborne (pictured above) who I had the pleasure to work with 2 years ago. Her story of triumph over adversity and the exhibit in general highlights how far we have come in many areas in ensuring access and inclusion for all people, regardless of ability. The opportunity to participate, compete, socialize, and grow through sports embodies Shriver’s vision of inclusion.

We are rightfully very proud of our history of inclusion in the Newton Public Schools. Inclusive education is not however, just about students with disabilities. It is about a commitment to social justice and pedagogy that is intersectional and that engages issues of disability, race, class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity in ways that enhance and transform all our students’ lives.

In order to be a truly inclusive district, we need to be vigilantly conscious of our assumptions and practices about the role of education and its outcomes for marginalized students – most often students with disabilities and students of color, ensuring that differences and diversity are indeed celebrated and recognized for their possibilities.

In the words of Paulo Freire (1985), we want our students and our adults to be able to “read the world” so that we are all conscious citizens creating a just and equitable school environment in service of a just and equitable world.

The right to an inclusive education in the true sense of the word is a fundamental human right of every child. Authentic inclusion requires us to reconceptualize curriculum, pedagogy and school structure. It requires the general education environment to adjust, accommodate and support every student with no preconditions, no requirements of fitting in or keeping pace. It is the right of every student to feel connected and that they belong and are a part of every aspect of school life, for it is this academic and social belonging in school that is the first step on the pathway to socio-economic inclusion and belonging in society.

In a time of great concern about school safety, it is schools that provide emotional and relational safety so that all students feel connected and a sense of belonging, that ultimately are the schools that provide the most physical safety as well.

It is a privilege to work in a district so committed to this vision and to partner with families, colleagues, school committee and community leaders and members as we strive to achieve a truly inclusive and just school community. Have a wonderful year.

Warm Wishes,

Karen