TIME TO CELEBRATE EDUCATION FOR EVERYONE

Kyrene School District this week is celebrating the fourth annual *National Inclusive Schools Week*, sponsored by the National Institute for Urban School Improvement.

The purpose of this week is to recognize the ever-increasing diversity among our student population and to celebrate the work performed on behalf of all children, particularly those with disabilities.

Kyrene's participation in this weeklong event is not about a set of activities that once completed are forgotten, but rather it stems from a philosophy that all individuals have a right to a quality of life that embraces differences, not just "tolerates" them.

Our philosophy is one that provides opportunities for learning no matter what a person's abilities or needs are. Kyrene schools are a place where children are valued and differences are seen as opportunities, not obstacles.

I would like to share an excerpt from a letter written in third grade by Emily, now a sophomore in high school, about embracing differences:

"I want to tell you about my friend that is atistick. He's a real good friend. I'm lucky he's my friend. Max doesn't care how people look or act. He's nice to everybody because he has a good heart.

"I wish other people would try to get to know those with differences before they make fun of them. They are probably missing out on one of the best friends they could ever have."

Max is my nephew, now a sophomore in high school, and he has autism. Max has taught me more about the importance of laughter, acceptance of self and others, and how to be an educator for all children than any book could ever address.

Emily went beyond the label and right to the heart of the matter ... the person. That is what inclusive education is about. Utilizing resources and supports in order for a child to succeed as a learner.

It is about looking at the child first and the disability second. Differences can be seen as barriers or opportunities. I choose the latter.

I encourage our community to join Kyrene schools in celebrating inclusive education this week.

Shari Dukes is the director of exceptional student services for the Kyrene School District. The views expressed are those of the author. This op-ed originally appeared in the Arizona Republic, December 7, 2004. Reprinted with permission from the author.