



inclusion in action

IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

A conference presented by FIRE Foundation

February 13-14, 2025

“

I trust that every Christian community will be open to the presence of our brothers and sisters with disabilities, and ensure that they are always welcomed and fully included.

”

- POPE FRANCIS, 2022



fire
FOUNDATION

Igniting Inclusive Catholic Education®

WELCOME

PARENTS, EDUCATORS, AND FRIENDS!



Living and true God,

You created all that is good and holy in Your image. Be close to us, Your servants, who gather here today. Be our constant help and protection as we lovingly reach out to welcome and embrace ALL Your children, regardless of their abilities, in our parishes and schools. Bless our children as they grow together in faith, knowledge, and friendship. And bless their parents and educators who guide them through challenges, who celebrate their special gifts and who encourage them to reach their potential. We ask this through Jesus Christ, Your son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. **Amen.**

Greetings!

On behalf of the FIRE Foundation Board of Directors, staff, and our network of affiliates, friends, and partner schools, we extend a warm welcome to Kansas City! Thank you for saying “yes!” to the invitation to participate in this conference. It is our hope that you will leave this conference equipped with new strategies for building and strengthening a culture of inclusion at your school. May you return to your home and classroom inspired to support students’ success.

As Pope Francis recently stated: “God, in His loving design, excludes no one.” As advocates for inclusive Catholic education, we believe children who learn differently should have the opportunity to flourish academically, socially, and spiritually, learning side-by-side with their peers.

If there’s anything we can do to assist you during the conference, please let us know. We are here to ensure your conference experience is meaningful, valuable, and enjoyable. If you have questions, please stop by the Registration/Information table. You can also call or text Erin Schmitz, conference coordinator, at 319-529-1109.

If you take photos during the conference, please post them on social media using these hashtags: **#inclusioninaction2025**, **#inclusionmatters**, **#beinclusive**, and **#FIREfoundation**. We look forward to meeting each of you and learning more about your inclusion journey. May God bless you.

Kind regards,

Lynn Hire

Executive Director

2013 - 2025

Molly Fisher

Executive Director

Appointed in 2025

Lynn will retire from her position with FIRE on February 28. It has been the greatest honor of her career to work with so many dedicated individuals who believe children baptized in our Faith deserve to experience the blessings of Catholic education. The FIRE Foundation family is pleased to welcome Molly Fisher, our next executive director, to carry forth FIRE’s mission and pursue a vision in which Catholic school students with disabilities are welcomed, supported, and valued.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The FIRE Foundation is deeply grateful to the following people and organizations for investing resources, time and expertise in the planning and execution of this conference. Your commitment to inclusive Catholic education is deeply appreciated.

- The Kauffman Foundation Conference Center for donation of meeting space.
- FIRE Foundation Board of Directors, staff, and Erin Schmitz, conference coordinator.
- The FIRE affiliates: FIRE Foundation of Northeast Iowa, FIRE Foundation of New Hampshire, FIRE Foundation of Dallas, FIRE Foundation of Central Illinois, FIRE Foundation of Northwest Iowa, FIRE Foundation of Denver, FIRE Foundation of Milwaukee, FIRE Foundation of Northeast Florida, FIRE Foundation of Northern Kentucky, FIRE Foundation of Wichita, and FIRE Foundation of Sacramento.



CONFERENCE AGENDA AT A GLANCE

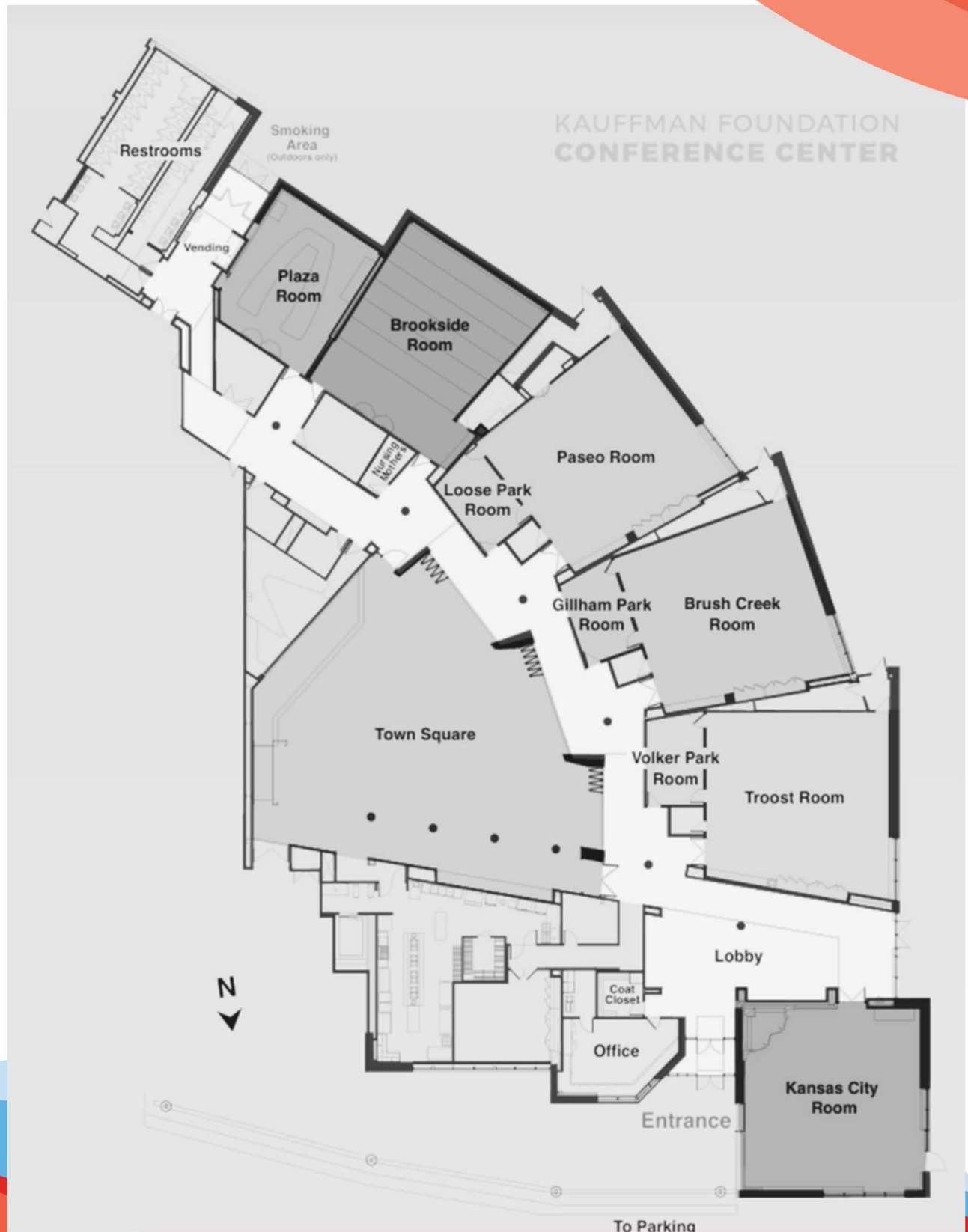
THURSDAY FEBRUARY 13

- 8:00 AM** REGISTRATION
- 8:30 AM** WELCOME & PRAYER
- 9:00 AM - 10:00 AM** GENERAL SESSION
KAREN GAFFNEY
- 10:20 AM - 11:30 AM** GENERAL SESSION
SEAN J. SMITH, PH.D AND MICHAEL FAGGELLA-LUBY, PH.D
- 11:30AM** LUNCH
- 12:00 PM - 1:00 PM** GENERAL SESSION
MARK BRADFORD
- 1:15 PM - 2:30 PM** EARLY AFTERNOON BREAKOUT SESSIONS
- 2:30 PM - 2:45 PM** BREAK
- 2:45 PM - 4:00 PM** AFTERNOON BREAKOUT SESSIONS
- 4:30 PM - 6:30 PM** BONFIRE AT GRAND STREET CAFE

FRIDAY FEBRUARY 14

- 8:15 AM** WELCOME & PRAYER
- 8:30 AM - 9:30 AM** GENERAL SESSION
CHRISTIE BONFIGLIO, PH.D
- 9:45 AM - 10:45 AM** GENERAL SESSION
MATT BRAUN, PH.D, L/CCC-SLP
- 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM** GENERAL SESSION
MICHAEL J. BOYLE, PH.D
- 12:00 PM - 12:30 PM** LUNCH
- 12:30 PM - 1:30 PM** GENERAL SESSION
BETH & PATRICK FORAKER
- 1:45 PM - 3:00 PM** EARLY AFTERNOON BREAKOUT SESSIONS
- 3:15 PM - 4:30 PM** AFTERNOON BREAKOUT SESSIONS

MEETING SPACE



DETAILED CONFERENCE AGENDA

Note: All General Sessions will be held in the Town Square room.

THURSDAY FEBRUARY 13

8:00 AM

REGISTRATION & BREAKFAST

8:30 AM

WELCOME & PRAYER

Lynn Hire

Executive Director (retiring)

FIRE Foundation

Molly Fisher

Executive Director (newly appointed)

FIRE Foundation

Karen Kroh, Ed.D

Superintendent

Diocese of Kansas City - St. Joseph

9:00 AM - 10:00 AM

GENERAL SESSION

WE BELONG!

Karen Gaffney

President, Karen Gaffney Foundation

Karen Gaffney credits her Inclusive Catholic education for her abilities to demonstrate, on a worldwide stage, that Down syndrome is a Life Meant to be Lived!

10:20 AM - 11:30 AM

GENERAL SESSION

**FROM STRUGGLING TO THRIVING: HOW AI IS
REVOLUTIONIZING INCLUSION IN PREK-12**

Sean J Smith, Ph.D and Michael Faggella-Luby, Ph.D

In this dynamic session, discover how artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming the educational landscape for struggling learners and students with disabilities in Catholic PreK-12 schools. We'll explore innovative ways AI is being leveraged to create more inclusive, engaging, and personalized learning experiences that align with Catholic values and mission. Participants will also learn how the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework can guide the integration of AI tools, ensuring that technology supports multiple means of engagement, representation, and action for all learners. By embedding AI into a UDL-based approach, educators can effectively differentiate instruction, provide real-time feedback, and promote equitable access to the curriculum. Join us to learn how AI and UDL together can empower educators, foster collaboration, and ensure every student has the opportunity to thrive academically and spiritually.

11:30 AM

LUNCH

12:00 PM - 1:00 PM

GENERAL SESSION

WILTING FLOWERS AND FLOURISHING SOULS

Mark Bradford, Fellow for Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Word on FIRE

Each year when school begins many families find themselves divided. Some children are welcomed at their parish school where their minds, bodies, and spirits are nourished by a balanced program of intellectual and faith formation. Other children in the family are not welcome because of their cognitive impairments and an unwillingness to accommodate them. This keynote presents the imperative of welcoming all students into our Catholic schools. It will do so from a perspective of Catholic social teaching which calls for justice and the integral human development of all persons so that all flourish together and fulfill their place in the Body of Christ. An emphasis will be placed on articulating this imperative to others.



1:15 PM - 2:30 PM

EARLY AFTERNOON BREAKOUT SESSIONS

BREAKOUT 1 | TOWN SQUARE ROOM

CLICK, TEACH, INCLUDE: AI TOOLS FOR EVERY LEARNER

Sean J. Smith, Ph.D

In today's diverse classrooms, supporting all learners—especially struggling students and their peers with disabilities—requires innovative approaches. This session explores how artificial intelligence (AI) can be a powerful ally in creating inclusive learning environments in Catholic schools. From personalized learning tools to assistive technologies, participants will discover practical, easy-to-implement AI solutions that enhance instruction and engagement for every student.

Through real-life examples and hands-on demonstrations, you'll learn how AI can help provide specific strategies, monitor progress, and foster collaboration among teachers, students, and families. Whether it's simplifying lesson planning, providing accessible content, replacing the need for traditional accommodations or addressing the unique needs of students with disabilities, this session will leave you equipped with strategies to integrate AI into your classroom seamlessly. Join us to unlock the potential of AI in transforming teaching and inclusion, making every learner feel valued and supported. No technical expertise required—just bring your curiosity and passion for inclusion!

BREAKOUT 2 | TROOST ROOM

**ACCOMMODATING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES WITH
SPECIALLY DESIGNED INSTRUCTION IN CONTENT AREA
CLASSROOMS**

Michael Faggella-Luby, Ph.D

This session will explore practical strategies for accommodating students with disabilities in content-area classrooms through the use of Specially Designed Instruction (SDI). Participants will learn how SDI ensures equitable access to the curriculum by tailoring instruction to meet students' unique needs without diluting academic rigor. The session will highlight the differences between accommodations, modifications, and interventions, providing real-world examples for implementing these supports in Catholic schools. Through engaging activities and case studies, attendees will gain insight into selecting appropriate strategies based on individual student profiles. Emphasizing inclusion within faith-based education, the session aligns with the mission to create meaningful learning opportunities for all students, upholding their dignity and potential in diverse classrooms.

BREAKOUT 3 | BRUSH CREEK ROOM

CATHOLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION PLANS

Mary Desmarais, M.Ed

In this session, participants will be introduced to two essential Catholic school educational plans: Accommodation Plans and Individualized Catholic Education Plans (ICEPs). Through a combination of practical examples and guided discussions, participants will gain a comprehensive understanding of the components, purpose, and significance of each plan. The session will explore how to identify students' specific needs, determine which plan is most appropriate for a student, and how to write both types of plans.

BREAKOUT 4 | PASEO ROOM

**OPENING THE DOORS OF TOMORROW TODAY....HOW
INCLUSION WORKED FOR ME!**

Karen Gaffney

Karen Gaffney is a graduate of St. Pius X Grade school, and St. Mary's Academy High school in Portland Oregon. Karen will share the tools and strategies that she, her family and teachers used that enabled Karen to be fully included in all her classes throughout her education. In addition, Karen will talk about the impact an inclusive Catholic education had on her as well as others.

2:45 PM - 4:00 PM

AFTERNOON BREAKOUT SESSIONS

BREAKOUT 1 | TOWN SQUARE ROOM

**SPECIAL EDUCATION AND GENERAL EDUCATION: A FORCE
TO BE RECKONED WITH**

Audrey Hihn and Amy Wantz

In this session you will hear from a special education teacher and a general education teacher about the power of collaboration. Together we will explore the pits and peaks of modifying and accommodating curriculum for the variability of our students; as well as how we practically teach our entire community about the "hidden curriculum" of inclusion. Participants will learn about effective collaboration and practical ways to accommodate and modify curriculum.

BREAKOUT 2 | TROOST ROOM

SUPPORTING THE EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING OF SECONDARY STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Amber B. Ray, Ph.D

Teaching executive functioning strategies to secondary students with disabilities is essential for their success in school and beyond. Executive functioning encompasses a set of cognitive processes that help students to navigate challenges, manage responsibilities, and accomplish their goals. In this session, participants will explore practical approaches to identify students' executive functioning strengths and areas for growth. Research-based executive functioning strategies will be presented and an approach for teaching them will be illustrated. Key focus areas that will be highlighted include planning, organization, time management, working memory, metacognition, sustained attention, and task initiation. This session will provide actionable strategies, real-world examples, and instructional techniques designed to empower educators to support their students in mastering these critical skills, fostering independence and long-term success.

BREAKOUT 3 | BRUSH CREEK ROOM

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BREAKOUT 4 | PASEO ROOM

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING (UDL) BASICS

Elizabeth O'Brien Walter, Ed.D.

Based in neuroscience, UDL is an approach to curriculum and instructional design that seeks to eliminate barriers to learning for all students. UDL presumes a diversity of learners in classrooms and all students are offered increased opportunities to access, participate, and progress in the general education curriculum. Curriculum designers use the UDL framework to structure and organize strategies for learner access, interpretation and processing, and application of content knowledge and skills. UDL also emphasizes additional aspects of learning, such as processing information and building deeper comprehension of content; utilizing executive functioning, organizational skills, and progress monitoring abilities; engaging in the learning environment; and defining self-assessment and self-reflection strategies.

4:30 PM - 6:30 PM

BONFIRE RECEPTION AT GRAND STREET CAFE

4740 GRAND AVE, KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI 64112

Tickets purchased ahead of time are required to attend.

DETAILED CONFERENCE AGENDA

Note: All General Sessions will be held in the Town Square room.

FRIDAY
FEBRUARY 14

8:15 AM

WELCOME & PRAYER

Erin Neuburger

Board President

FIRE Foundation

Bishop James V. Johnston

Bishop of the Diocese of Kansas City - St. Joseph

8:30 AM - 9:30 AM

GENERAL SESSION

ENGAGING THE DISENGAGEMENT DILEMMA

Christie Bonfiglio, Ph.D

Student disengagement is an increasing concern. More than half of students report they are "disengaged most of the time" and educators report higher levels of disengagement following the pandemic. More students are "unmotivated," "uninterested," and/or "non-compliant," leaving teachers with quite a dilemma. However, student engagement is a complex variable with a profound effect on student success and the classroom environment. This interactive keynote provides an overview of the contributing factors—both student and teacher directed. It explores engagement from multiple perspectives and outlines practical, evidence-based strategies to increase engagement-related behaviors. Engage the disengagement dilemma!



9:45 AM - 10:45 AM

GENERAL SESSION

**MTSS IN ACTION: DEMYSTIFYING TIER 2 INTERVENTIONS
AND IMPLEMENTATION**

Matt Braun, Ph.D, L/CCC-SLP

MTSS (Multi-Tiered Systems of Support) is by no means a new concept, yet how to effectively integrate this framework into classrooms remains one of the most requested professional development topics by teachers and administrators. This session will include a brief overview of MTSS as a whole, followed by a deeper dive into the mysterious Tier 2 level of this framework. Many questions exist around Tier 2 interventions including: who is responsible for providing these interventions?; what do these interventions look like?; how are these implemented in an already jam packed daily schedule?; and how the heck am I supposed to gather data on this stuff? This session will explore the answers to these questions and provide ideas on how to efficiently and effectively implement Tier 2 interventions in educational environments.

11:00 AM - 12:00 PM

GENERAL SESSION

EVERY SINGLE SOUL: THE CASE FOR INCLUSIONARY APPROACHES IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Michael J. Boyle, Ph.D

Disability is not exceptional but a natural condition that must be anticipated and prepared for in parishes and schools. The essential question becomes: How do we prepare ourselves and our students for the time that we experience disability? By hiding disability, we give the message that there is something wrong or disordered about the disability. This presentation presents a case for why inclusionary approaches are not only for the student with a disability but positively impacts all students.

12:30 PM - 1:30 PM

GENERAL SESSION & LUNCH

COLLEGE IS POSSIBLE FOR STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES! THE URGENT CALL FOR CATHOLIC COLLEGES TO SAY YES!

Beth and Patrick Foraker

This session will provide the most up-to-date information on inclusive college programs nationwide from both a parent perspective, a student perspective and a director perspective. The core competencies of successful students in inclusive college programs will be highlighted. Stories of what is possible and an urgent call to action for Catholic colleges will be shared. Educational - Enlightening - Empowering

1:45 PM - 3:00 PM

EARLY AFTERNOON BREAKOUT SESSIONS

BREAKOUT 1 | TOWN SQUARE ROOM

THE JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES: BUILDING CAPACITY TO EDUCATE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Michael J. Boyle, Ph.D

Catholic schools strive to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for all students. But, creating approaches to educating students with disabilities in Catholic school settings does not materialize from thin air. Quality programs come from careful, systematic planning and a commitment to concretizing a school's Catholic identity and living a preferential option for those that are marginalized. In this session, participants will have the opportunity to explore planning checklists and inventories to apply to their own school settings.

BREAKOUT 2 | TROOST ROOM

THE NITTY GRITTY OF TIER 2 INTERVENTIONS

Matt Braun, PhD, L/CCC-SLP

Dr. Braun will provide a follow up breakout session that will take a deeper dive into Tier 2 interventions and outline some specific strategies for implementing Tier 2 interventions in the classroom and other educational environments.



BREAKOUT 3 | BRUSH CREEK ROOM

INCLUSION: READY OR NOT, HERE IT COMES!

Christie Bonfiglio, Ph.D

Catholic schools are called to serve ALL students, while student populations are becoming ever-more diverse. However, inclusive education requires intentional planning. Although it is the first step in welcoming everyone, it is not enough to 'just say yes.' Catholic schools must be thoughtful in understanding their cultures, systems, and practices. They must create meaningful academic, social/emotional, and spiritual communities to ensure success. This interactive session explores critical components of inclusive schools and outlines the importance of best practices for all students. It provides a brief audit of school readiness and encourages reflection on action steps. Ready or not...inclusion is here!

BREAKOUT 4 | PASEO ROOM

WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER: BUILDING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR (ARCH)DIOCESE AND CATHOLIC SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Karen Kroh, Ed.D

Discover practical strategies for fostering collaboration, trust, and alignment between Catholic schools and diocesan leadership. This session will equip you with tools to enhance communication, build partnerships, and strengthen the shared mission of Catholic education.

3:15 PM - 4:30 PM

AFTERNOON BREAKOUT SESSIONS

BREAKOUT 1 | TOWN SQUARE ROOM

MTSS MADE SIMPLE: BUILDING INCLUSIVE SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR EVERY STUDENT

Linda Crosthwait, M.Ed

This session meets the FIRE Foundation's mission by offering practical, inclusive, and evidence-based strategies to support all students. MTSS is a proven framework that ensures no student is left behind, empowering educators with the tools they need to foster equity and success in their schools.

BREAKOUT 2 | TROOST ROOM

THE NITTY GRITTY OF TIER 2 INTERVENTIONS

Matt Braun, Ph.D, L/CCC-SLP

Dr. Braun will provide a follow up breakout session that will take a deeper dive into Tier 2 interventions and outline some specific strategies for implementing Tier 2 interventions in the classroom and other educational environments.

BREAKOUT 3 | BRUSH CREEK ROOM

PROMOTING STUDENT SUCCESS IN A HIGH-RATIO SETTING

Tyler Goevert

This presentation will focus on providing support in larger group settings while managing higher student-to-staff ratios when paraprofessional/RBT support is not available. Included in the material will be environmental support strategies, individual support strategies, and best practices for promoting positive behaviors in the classroom.

Attendees will leave this presentation with greater confidence in areas including: Implementing environmental supports, incorporating individual support in whole group instruction, and management of behavioral challenges.

BREAKOUT 4 | PASEO ROOM

THE GROWTH MINDSET: THE BACKDOOR TO INCLUSION

BETH & PATRICK FORAKER

Patrick and Beth will share how the Growth Mindset can become a classroom mindset that allows for a more inclusive experience for all students and will make room for authentic inclusion of students with disabilities, too. This mindset can be implemented school-wide to create a more inclusive school as well!

Our FIRE Mission

To champion the inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools by providing educational resources, fundraising and promoting a culture of belonging.



PRESENTERS

CHRISTIE BONFIGLIO, PH.D

Dr. Christie Bonfiglio joined the faculty at the University of Notre Dame in 2014 as Director of the Office of Professional Standards and Graduate Studies for the Alliance for Catholic Education. With a background in school psychology and special education, Bonfiglio launched the Program for Inclusive Education (PIE) in 2016 and serves as PIE's director. PIE seeks to ensure students with different learning, social, emotional, behavioral, and executive functioning needs are integrated into Catholic schools. Bonfiglio teaches across multiple programs related to her work in inclusive education and provides professional development in this area across the country. Prior to her work at Notre Dame, Bonfiglio was the director of the Education Department at Goshen College following her work in public schools as a school psychologist. Bonfiglio's areas of expertise include behavioral and academic interventions through a Multi-Tiered System of Support. She is also well-versed in collaboration and child study teams. Bonfiglio has multiple publications on the effects of evidence-based reading interventions for at-risk students, as well as the impact of function-based behavioral interventions. She most recently served as co-editor and author of a special issue in the *Journal of Catholic Education* entitled "Inclusion in Catholic Schools." She is grateful to be directing her knowledge and skills to serve Catholic schools in their pursuit of inclusive education.



MICHAEL J. BOYLE, PH.D.

Michael J. Boyle, Ph.D. serves as the Executive Director of the Hermann Center for Innovative Catholic Education at the School of Education-Saint Louis University. Dr. Boyle brings a rich educational background, including roles as Superintendent of Catholic Schools, Director of the Andrew M. Greeley Center for Catholic Education at Loyola University Chicago, Catholic school principal, school psychologist and special education administrator. In 2014, Dr. Boyle was named the recipient of the C. Albert Koob Merit Award by the National Catholic Education Association for significant contributions to Catholic education. Loyola University Chicago selected Dr. Boyle as a distinguished alumnus of the School Psychology program (2022) and of the Administration/Supervision program (2017). Dr. Boyle has provided staff development programs and technical assistance to educational agencies both nationally and internationally in the areas of multi-tiered systems of support in Catholic schools, inclusion, and mission-driven leadership in the context of Catholic education.

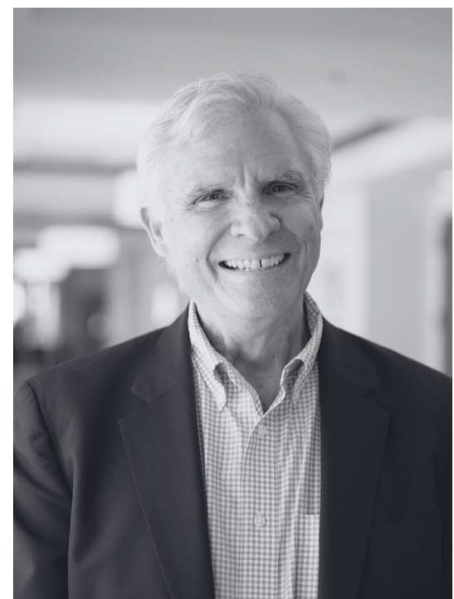


MARK BRADFORD

Mark Bradford was appointed the Word on Fire Institute's Fellow for Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities at the beginning of 2023. For over 20 years, he has been blessed to serve in leadership positions in various church ministries, including as the executive vice president of The National Catholic Bioethics Center, and the founding president of the Jerome Lejeune Foundation in the U.S. Mark and his wife Denise are parents to Thomas, their 6th of 7 children (and first son), who happens to have been gifted with an extra 21st chromosome. Mark is a passionate advocate for those born with intellectual and developmental disabilities, for their families and for their full inclusion the Church and its ministries wherever possible. He is the author/editor of two books that will be published by Word on Fire in 2025, *Let Us Pray, A Catholic Prayerbook for All Abilities*, and *Indispensable: A Catholic Guide to Welcoming Persons with Disabilities*. He writes regularly for Word on Fire's *Evangelization and Culture Online*, and his work can also be seen at *Aleteia* and *The American Conservative*.

Mark is convinced that the solution to exclusion of persons with disabilities in society and the Church is through inclusion—and the younger, the better. In his role as the Word on Fire Institute's Fellow for Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Mark has been charged with defending the lives of babies prenatally diagnosed with genetic disabilities, and broadly supporting the needs of persons with developmental disabilities in the Church.

A top priority has been to host various virtual events on the Word on Fire platform to inform Word on Fire Institute members about the possibilities of funding and providing inclusive education in Catholic schools. He has also convened a group of seasoned consultants and professionals working in Catholic "special education" at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels, and also those involved in private foundations, like FIRE, who are working together on various initiatives to encourage and broaden the opportunities for inclusion in Catholic schools.



MATT BRAUN, PH.D, L/CCC-SLP

Dr. Matt Braun is a Speech-Language Pathologist who owns and runs a private practice that provides speech and occupational therapy services across the Kansas City metro area. His team of 17 speech and occupational therapists provide in-home and community based services to individuals and families with a variety of needs. In addition to these services, his team works with a number of public and private schools to provide direct services as well as consultative services to support the needs of teachers and students. Dr. Braun has a cooperative partnership with the FIRE Foundation through which he and his team provide speech therapy services, occupational therapy services, and educational consulting services to ten FIRE partner schools in the Kansas City area. Dr. Braun and his wife, Sandy have three children, all of whom attend or have attended Catholic schools. Their passion for inclusive education stems not only from their professional work, but also from their personal experiences fostering inclusion in every environment for their youngest son Luke who was born with a medical condition that resulted in a number of special learning needs.



LINDA CROSTHWAIT, M.ED

Linda Crosthwait currently serves as the principal of St. Thomas More School, a vibrant Catholic community that places a strong emphasis on faith, academic excellence, and inclusion. Under her leadership, the school has embraced the mission of creating an environment where every child, regardless of ability, can thrive academically, socially, and spiritually. This dedication to inclusive education is reflected in St. Thomas More's commitment to implementing innovative teaching practices, fostering a culture of belonging, and supporting the diverse needs of its students. Linda Crosthwait views the school as a ministry, with the shared goal of guiding every member of the community closer to heaven through their daily interactions and efforts. With a certification in special education and 35 years of experience in Catholic and public education, Linda has been instrumental in advancing inclusive practices. Most recently, Linda spearheaded a grant initiative through the KC STEM Alliance to expand inclusive STEM education, ensuring that problem-solving, critical thinking, and hands-on learning opportunities are accessible to all students. She has also led efforts to strengthen inclusive education through community-building events, such as a weeklong fundraiser for the FIRE Foundation, which celebrated the benefits of inclusion for students of all abilities. With a deep understanding of evidence-based practices and a collaborative leadership style, Linda continues to guide St. Thomas More toward fulfilling its mission of serving all students with love, dignity, and purpose.



MARY DESMARAIS, M.ED

Mary Desmarais is an independent consultant who started her teaching career at a Catholic high school in Arlington, VA. There, her passion for inclusive education was ignited. Building upon this experience, she founded Catholic Inclusion, LLC, a consulting agency dedicated to helping Catholic schools include and educate students with high support needs and disabilities through various inclusion models, including the use of peer support arrangements that integrate students of all abilities. In addition to her consulting work, Mary offers teacher coaching and professional development, providing educators with tools, strategies, and the support they need to foster accessible classrooms. Mary earned her undergraduate degree from the University of Scranton, her Master of Education and Human Development from George Washington University and her Master of Administration and Supervision from Marymount University.



MICHAEL FAGGELLA-LUBY, PH.D

Michael Faggella-Luby, PhD, is a professor of special education and core faculty of the Alice Neeley Special Education Research and Service (ANSERS) Institute at Texas Christian University. He is also a past president of the Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD) of the Council for Exceptional Children and an associate editor for the Journal of Learning Disabilities. His primary research embeds cognitive learning strategies into subject-area courses to improve reading comprehension for all levels of learners. He has received two national awards for his research, has written 59 scholarly publications, and has presented 90 sessions at national or international conferences. His first book, *Data Rules: Elevating Teaching with Objective Reflection* is now available from ASCD.



BETH AND PATRICK FORAKER

Beth and her husband, John, are parents to four children: Jack, Mary Kate, Patrick, and Caroline. Their third child, Patrick, has Down Syndrome. He was fully included K-8 in his local Catholic school and then fully included in a public high school when the Catholic school refused to welcome him. Patrick was able to earn a California high school diploma. Patrick is a recent graduate of a four-year inclusive college program. Beth founded the National Catholic Board on Full Inclusion in 2014 and works to support schools - all schools - to be more inclusive. Beth has been an educator for over thirty years and worked for fifteen years for UC Davis in the School of Education with beginning teachers in their Multiple Subject Credential/Masters Program. In 2020, Beth became the Co-Director of the UC Davis Redwood SEED Scholars Program - the first four-year, residential, inclusive college program in California. She works to build what she calls Continuums of Inclusion: communities that offer preschool through four-year college inclusion so that independent adulthood - inclusive living and inclusive employment - and full belonging are possible. With the launch of the UC Davis Redwood SEED Scholars Program, the City of Davis, California is now one!



KAREN GAFFNEY

Karen Gaffney is the President of the Karen Gaffney Foundation. Her non-profit, funded entirely by her speaking engagements, workshops, and donations, is dedicated to championing the journey to full inclusion in families, schools, the workplace, and the community for people with intellectual disabilities. In addition to her work at her non profit, Karen is a full time employee in a law firm, working 32 hours a week. She is an outspoken advocate for inclusion in the regular classroom for students of all abilities and she shares her experiences, tools and strategies that helped her succeed in her Parish classroom and in an all girl Catholic High School. Karen is also a role model for physical fitness, and she builds regular exercise into every aspect of her day. She usually starts the day with a two mile swim before she heads off to work! She has a lengthy swim resume to keep up! She successfully swam a relay across the English Channel, a 9 mile nonstop solo swim straight across the width of Lake Tahoe in 59-degree water and became the subject of the documentary: Crossing Tahoe: A Swimmer's Dream. She has done many other open water swims on the Columbia River, across Lake Champlain, the Boston Harbor, and the San Francisco Bay just to name a few. All of her swims are fundraising swims, and swims to raise awareness about what people with Down syndrome CAN do! Karen's work with advocacy and public speaking has taken her to audiences all over the world where she tries to show that Down syndrome is a life meant to be lived! And she succeeds!



TYLER GOEVERT

Tyler is an education specialist at Down Syndrome Innovations. During the past five years, he has provided support to students in both private and public settings through classroom observations, teacher consultations, and IEP/BIP review.



AUDREY HIHN

Audrey Hihn is the Director of Inclusion at Saint Elizabeth School in Kansas City, MO. She has a Master's degree in Special Education from the University of Kansas and was a part of the PIE 6 Cohort at the University of Notre Dame. She joins our team after serving as the St. James Academy's Resource Director for three years, followed by four years at St. Michael the Archangel High School running the SMILE program.

As an inclusion specialist, Audrey is inspired every day by the strength and determination of her students and staff. Her favorite inclusion quote comes from USCCB 2005 "Persons with disabilities, are not just recipients of catechesis-they are also its agents".



KAREN KROH, ED.D

Dr. Karen Kroh is a dedicated Catholic school leader with extensive experience in special education and mission-driven leadership. She currently serves as the Superintendent of Schools for the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, where she guides schools in advancing faith-based education and inclusive practices. Prior to this role, Dr. Kroh served as the Associate Superintendent for the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas, bringing a wealth of expertise in fostering collaboration, supporting educators, and ensuring student success. Her passion lies in empowering schools to meet the diverse needs of all learners, creating environments where every child can thrive academically, spiritually, and socially.



SEAN J. SMITH, PH.D

A Professor of the University of Kansas, Sean is focused on supporting educators and family members in their efforts to meaningfully include all children in Catholic education. For over thirty years, Sean has been blessed to work with Catholic schools from Washington, DC to Phoenix, AZ and everywhere in between. Focused on implementing educational practices that work, Sean regularly conducts research and publishes scholarly papers in journals such as the Journal of Catholic Education. He has collaborated with a number of Catholic-focused entities including assisting in the development of the University of Notre Dame's Program for Inclusive Education (where he served as adjunct faculty until the summer of 2024) as well as the FIRE Foundation. Yes, blessed to be an educator, researcher, and scholar, however, most proud to be a parent of four wonderful children. Sean's oldest son, Nolan, has Down syndrome and has directed much of Sean's efforts, particularly in furthering opportunities in Catholic education for all learners.



AMBER B. RAY, PH.D

Dr. Amber Ray is an Associate Professor of Special Education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Dr. Ray's research interests include writing and reading interventions and instruction to help students with disabilities and diverse learning needs succeed. Her research focuses on strategy and self-regulation approaches to instruction and methods of professional development for teachers and school leaders on effective writing and reading instruction. Dr. Ray works on developing evidence-based instruction to cultivate the learning of all students, including those with disabilities, and has conducted research with elementary through high school students and adults. Her passion for inclusion in Catholic schools was sparked in her early days of her own pre-service instruction at Loras College where she earned her Bachelor's degree in Secondary Special Education and English literature. She then earned her Masters of Education in Special Education and Literacy Specialist endorsement through the Pacific Alliance for Catholic Education. During this time, Dr. Ray was a high school special education teacher at LaSalle Catholic College Preparatory. She helped start a special education program that would meet the needs of students with disabilities. She then became the co-director of special education. Dr. Ray went on to earn her Ph.D. in Learning, Literacies, and Technologies with a specialization in Special Education at Arizona State University. Dr. Ray is the President of the FIRE Foundation of Central Illinois and works to ignite inclusive Catholic education. She continues her devotion to Catholic schools by delivering professional development for teachers and school leaders.



ELIZABETH O'BRIEN WALTER, ED.D.

Dr. Walter is a tenure-track assistant professor in the School of Education at Rockhurst University. Prior to her time in higher education, she taught English, social science, reading and AVID in the Blue Valley USD in Overland Park, Kansas. She was honored as the 2008 Blue Valley Teacher of the Year. Dr. Walter's primary research agenda revolves around the achievement gap in minoritized populations in Kansas City, Missouri. Additional research interests include educational leadership, trauma-informed schools, inclusion and access, and social justice. She teaches a variety of courses in the school of education: Introduction to Education, Foundations of Classroom Management, Foundations of Special Education, Curriculum/Methods/Assessment for Secondary Educators, and Student Teaching Seminar. Additionally, she has taught the Higher Education Assessment, Teacher Leadership, and Classroom Management in Higher Education courses in the RU EdD program. Her philosophy of education is closely tied to the Jesuit Core Values of Magis and Cura Personalis as she seeks to engage pre-service and in-service teachers in the ideals of St. Ignatius of Loyola.



AMY WANTZ

Amy Wantz is an elementary school teacher that has taught every grade from third to seventh. Amy received her undergraduate degree from Mount Marty College, (now University) in Yankton, South Dakota. She continued her education by receiving a Masters in Integrated Humanities and Education from Rockhurst University. Amy believes in a strong Catholic education and began teaching at St. Thomas More then moved to St. Elizabeth School. Amy is currently at St. Elizabeth's as a seventh grade religion and ELA teacher. One of Amy's favorite quotes is: "What is done with love is done well."
~ Vincent Van Gogh



PRAYER

God, Creator of all, help us to recognize that each of us has abilities and each of us has limitations. And yet, we all have a part to play in bringing about your Kingdom. You love each of us profoundly. In the spirit of gratitude and solidarity, we ask you to increase our awareness of both the gifts and the needs of those around us. Open our hearts, minds and doors to the gifts every person possesses. Help us remember we are all made in Your image. Help us become truly welcoming communities where everyone can find a place at Your table, a place where everyone belongs. We ask this through Jesus Christ, Your Son and our Lord.

Amen



FIRE'S MISSION AND REACH

FIRE began with six passionate families and one big dream: for all children, regardless of ability, to be able to learn together, with their peers, in their parish schools. Fueled by faith and determination, they united on a mission to open the doors of Catholic schools to children with special needs. In 1998, when the FIRE Foundation made its first grants to schools to support inclusive Catholic education, a new and exciting trail was blazed. Until that time, a majority of Catholic schools did not have the resources needed to create successful learning opportunities for students with significant intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Since then, FIRE has granted over \$8 million to Catholic schools in the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph. Funds are used to hire special educators and paraprofessionals, to provide professional development for educators, and to purchase learning technology and curriculum so students with disabilities and learning differences have the resources they need to succeed. FIRE is committed to opening doors and opening hearts to inclusive Catholic education and inspiring others to do the same. During the past two decades, we have learned that when schools foster a culture of acceptance and compassion, ALL students benefit. It's a special gift to watch students of all abilities grow together in knowledge, faith, and friendship.

FIRE's model of funding and advocacy has become a leading model for inclusive Catholic education. Since 2016, we have enthusiastically welcomed and partnered with 11 affiliates including FIRE Foundation of Northeast Iowa (Archdiocese of Dubuque), FIRE Foundation of New Hampshire (Diocese of Manchester), FIRE Foundation of Dallas, FIRE Foundation of Central Illinois (Diocese of Peoria), FIRE Foundation of Northwest Iowa (Diocese of Sioux City), FIRE Foundation of Denver (Archdiocese of Denver), FIRE Foundation of Milwaukee (Archdiocese of Milwaukee), FIRE Foundation of Northeast Florida (Diocese of St. Augustine), FIRE Foundation of Northern Kentucky (Diocese of Covington), FIRE Foundation of Wichita (Diocese of Wichita) and FIRE Foundation of Sacramento (Diocese of Sacramento). As the desire and demand for inclusive learning opportunities continues to grow, FIRE strives to light the way for others who are just beginning this journey. **For more information, visit firefoundation.org.**

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CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE.
COMPLETE THIS BRIEF
EVALUATION. THANK YOU!**



Igniting Inclusive Catholic Education®