[Music]

So in Augusta county the preschool program is totally inclusive, so that means that children attend the preschool class where they live with their community peers. So we don't have separate classrooms for children that have disabilities. We believe that children are children first and that we look at their disability as to the services that they need to receive to access the curriculum, not to keep them separate from their typically developing peers.

[Music]

The Department of Education fully supports inclusion of young children and early childhood programs. We know that inclusion is legally required, we have two primary laws that guide us on this topic. The individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act both require early childhood programs to make reasonable accommodations and provisions for the inclusion of young children with disabilities. We know that inclusion means having high expectations for all children, and that's truly one of the major benefits of including young children with disabilities and developmental delays.

[Children singing]

I think inclusion works when people are willing to accept all of the differences that everybody comes with. We all have differences and we need to be accepting of each other, and students as well. We need to see the student for their strengths build to their strengths and you know help them progress. So I think what makes it work is that everybody has that attitude, and in kind of a philosophy that we need to all be included in everything.

[Music]

An inclusive preschool environment doesn’t just happen certainly there's a lot of hard work and intentional preparation and planning. It starts at the administrative level in ensuring that teachers have the resources and the supports that they need to work with a variety of students in their same classroom. So that comes with intentional and sustained professional development. So we make room in our calendar and in our instructional planning to be sure that those preschool teachers, and the para-professionals who support them, have access to that on a routine basis. And again, it's very intentionally aligned with our overall goals of providing a successful classroom experience to all of our students regardless of their abilities for their disabilities.

I think that we all work really well together as a team. We collaborate to do what's best for children and we plan together. We meet with the families and find out what their needs are for their child at home so we can carry over what they're doing at home to school, and the same thing, strategies we're working on at school we carry over to the home and we are all team we work together as a team in preschool. We have a speech therapist at our school, we have an occupational therapist, and a physical therapist, and our team also includes the parents of the child our administrator. Anybody who works with the student and we all work together to plan and what's best for the child to meet their needs.

[Music]

Our speech therapist and the other therapists that work with our students in preschool, they work in the classroom because that's what's best for the children. It's play based and they learn how to get along with each other and they play and they're learning how to communicate with the other children rather than being taken to a separate classroom where there's really not anyone else in there for them to play with. It's helpful for them to be in the classroom and the speech therapist is in our classroom every day and working with not just one child but other children come over to work with her as well and you know they all play together and interact and that's what's best for the children.

One of the best examples I could share was I went into a classroom, and there was a student with special needs who was surrounded by her peers, and they were all working with us someone who was providing specialized services, but the regular Ed students were assisting with that they were singing songs and they were clapping and they were working on some speech things and so just to see that group of students working closely together was an amazing thing and the teacher said they continued to work with that student sometimes outside of the time when the specialist is in the room with them. So I just think that's a really special way for all of the kids to interact together and to see the strengths that everyone has.

[Children talking]

So my husband and I have two kids, Heath is first he's 8 years old and he goes to Hugh K. Cassel. And then we have Kinley, our daughter she'll be a five in a couple weeks and she also goes to Hugh K. This is her second year in preschool. She was born with Down syndrome and also a heart defect so she's had some surgeries and medical stuff but it's just one small part. She's very social she loves music she loves dancing and she's just kind of added a lot to our life.

[Children singing]

As a parent of a child with a disability you have a lot of fears and one of the main ones was what's her life going to look like. Is she going to be included? Is she gonna have friends? I wanted her to go to a place where she was wanted, not just accepted, I guess, but embraced. And so that was kind of the plan, the whole time Kinley is just one of the crew. She got her first birthday invite a couple months ago, and we were super excited about the first day dropping her off at preschool. You can imagine it was terrifying for me and her classroom is literally like 35 steps in from the door because I counted. And I kept telling myself 35 steps, and then you can cry. But within that 35 steps it probably takes us a good five or six minutes, because the hall monitors are saying “hi” to her you know she's going over and popping her head in classrooms and saying “hi” to people and greeting people. So just overall it's been a really good really good experience.

[Music]