



Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

FAX: (919) 966-7532

November 7, 1997

RE: Cathy Thornton
Letter of Support and Recommendation for the
Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher Awards
The Washington Post Company Educational Foundation

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing in support of the nomination of Cathy Thornton for the Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher Award sponsored by The Washington Post Company Educational Foundation. Mrs. Thornton is currently employed by the Fairfax County Virginia School System as a teacher of children with autism.

I have known Cathy Thornton since January 1996 and have visited her classroom three times since then, as well as having telephone conversations with her and working with her on a special summer project in 1997. During that time, Cathy has been the teacher of one of the children in our research study. In my opinion, Cathy is an excellent teacher, and I am delighted to provide a letter of support for her nomination for this prestigious award.

As a former teacher of children with and without disabilities at both the elementary and secondary levels and as a former administrator of programs for children with and without disabilities, I have had the opportunity to work with many teachers from many different fields. In my current position as director of three research studies, I visit schools in Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina and interact with many teachers. Cathy Thornton has impressed me as one of the best teachers that I have encountered during my career in education.

Cathy's classroom is inviting and is organized in a manner that facilitates the development and instruction of her students. In addition to having an understanding of child development, both normal and atypical, Cathy has the intuitive ability to tune into the individual needs of the children in her class and seems to have excellent rapport with each of the children in her class. She has clear rules and uses behavior management practices consistently. The children in her class seem to be very attached to her and her interactions with them are positive and warm.

Cathy is also a master of individualization. Although the children in her class are very diverse and function at varying developmental levels, she is able to individually tailor activities for each child while incorporating meaningful group experiences.

In addition to working well with her students, Cathy works extremely well with both her teaching colleagues at Poplar Tree Elementary and with individuals from the community. This past summer I observed her as she provided consultation to the staff of a recreation program regarding the special needs of a child with fragile X syndrome. Cathy's extensive knowledge of child development and of the needs of all children, enabled her to quickly appraise the situation, develop a plan for facilitating the integration of the child into the group, and to work with staff members in a collegial and helpful manner.

I observed a similar situation at Poplar Tree Elementary last month. Cathy accompanied three of her students with special needs into a regular second grade classroom. She introduced me to that teacher earlier, and it was quite apparent that they considered themselves partners in providing instruction and support to all of the children in the class. Although this may not seem noteworthy, it is. A major goal of educators for the past several years has been the full inclusion of children with special needs in regular classes. Although this seems a reasonable goal, it often terrifies teacher of typically developing children who have not had experience with children with disabilities. It is relatively rare to find a teacher of children with special needs with such a collaborative relationship with a regular classroom teacher. However, that is exactly what Cathy has accomplished. While she is in the regular class, she provides support for all children, not just the three students who are assigned to her.

In summary, Cathy Thornton combines enthusiasm, expertise, excellent communication skills, compassion, and empathy in a manner that makes her uniquely suited for this award. In addition, she is quite knowledgeable about issues in the field and employs recommended practices and exemplary teaching on a consistent basis. In addition, she is interested in research in education and has been most supportive of our study. Over the course of the past 22 months, I have seen the transformation that has occurred in one of the children in our study as Cathy has focused on his specific strengths and needs and has motivated him to achieve his potential. At the same time, she has established a collaborative relationship with the child's parents that demonstrates the value of teacher/parent partnerships. I commend Cathy for her accomplishments and for being such an outstanding role model for exemplary teaching.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Deborah Hatton", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Deborah Hatton, Ph.D.
Research Investigator