

Dear Brian,

Happy New Year! I wanted to send you a brief note to let you know how much our entire family enjoyed the PittVerse party the other evening. We are so very proud of all that [REDACTED] has accomplished, and could not be more thrilled that he has the opportunity to work with such an enthusiastic, dedicated group of peers and staff. As a mom, I love the warm, supportive, caring environment that YAP provides. As an teacher, who has taught adolescents with autism for 20 years, I am blown away by the level of professionalism and true respect that everyone in your agency exhibits toward every individual. It is obvious that you value the contributions of each PittVerse member, and recognize the unique skill set that individuals with autism bring to the table. I have always taught everyone around me to "presume competence" and you and your staff do just that!

[REDACTED] mother, [REDACTED], happens to be my best friend, as well as my classroom assistant. Together, we have taught hundreds of students with autism over the years, several of whom are now PittVerse writers. She and I have been talking about how much we enjoyed the evening, how wonderful it was to see our own children, as well as our former students, experiencing success, and how amazing we found the entire experience.

Most importantly, though, I need to share with you about the impact the event made on my son, Ross. I am sure you remember the little guy in the front row who raised his hand to ask you a question when you shared the exciting news about the grant being renewed. That was [REDACTED], who is 9 years old, is [REDACTED]'s stepbrother, and who also happens to have autism. He was enthralled throughout the evening, and had a terrific time. When I tucked him into bed that night, he looked at me and said, "Mom, you know what I learned tonight? I learned that people who have autism are super cool!! I am so glad that I get to be cool like that!" I am sure you can imagine how touched I was to hear that he had taken such a positive, personal message away from the night. Raising any child to have a strong self image is a challenge, but for kids whom society often treats differently, it can be even more difficult. Thank you for helping Ross to know that he is "super cool!"

Please share my thanks with your entire staff. You are doing important, meaningful work, and it is appreciated!

Warmly,  
Melissa Ringold