

# WTAFF??!

## The Five Fs Schools Need to Rethink About Autistic Students

Flexibility

Functionality

Freedom

Fairness

Facts

*Otto Lana · Dr. Julie Causton · Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak*

# Rules of Engagement

*(We do things differently around here.)*

**1.**

Cameras on or off.  
You do you!

**2.**

Chat like it's a group text  
with your funniest friends.

**3.**

Type WTAF in the chat  
when something blows  
your mind.

**4.**

Move your body if you  
need to.

**5.**

Disagree. We love a good  
challenge.

**6.**

Come as you are.  
No performance needed.

# Opening Chat Splash

Pick any prompt — number your response in the chat!

**1.**

One word for how you're showing up today?

**2.**

Your role in education?

**3.**

Your biggest personal WTF moment with an Autistic student?

**4.**

What do you hope to leave with today?

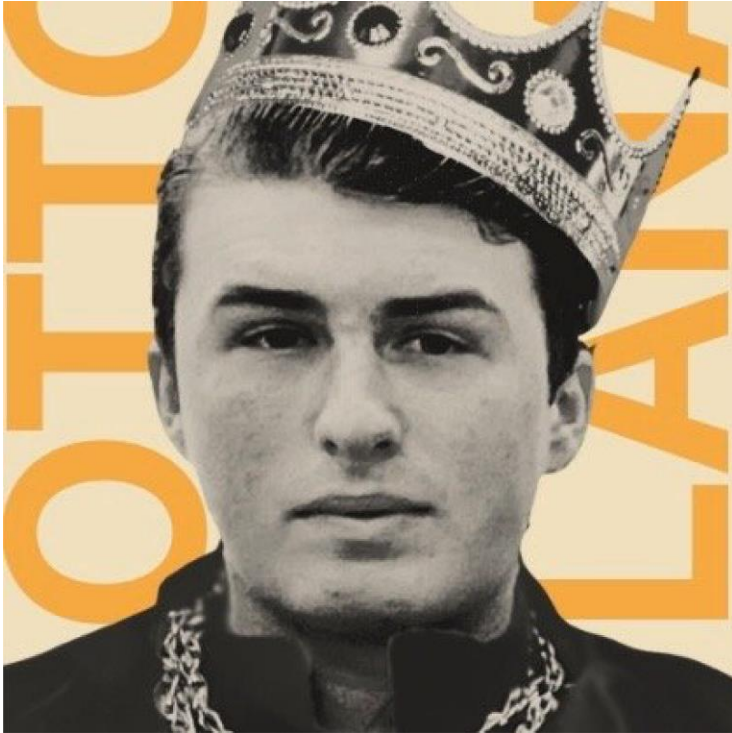
**5.**

On a scale of 1–10, how inclusion-ready is your school right now?

**6.**

Something else you want to share.

# Meet Otto Lana



"I am the reigning King of Inclusion.  
I am one name famous.  
I am autistic and apraxic.  
I am a one finger wonder,  
droppin' gems, one letter at a time."

Sophomore, University of San Diego.

*"I'm bringing waves of change, don  
your life vest, you're in the splash zone  
now!"*

# Meet Dr. Julie Causton



**Professor brains. ADHD identity.  
Mama bear heart. A lot of sparkle.**

14 years as tenured professor at Syracuse University.

Founded Inclusive Schooling in 2012.  
25+ years obsessing over inclusive schools.

Best-selling author. Keynote speaker.

More books on inclusion than fingers to count.

# Meet Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak



I'm an educators' educator. A fierce play advocate.  
An inclusion thought leader.

I started as an early interventionist, so I've been in  
the trenches right alongside educators and families.

I spent 16 years as a tenured professor at Kent State  
University, and logged more than 70,000 hours  
helping educators and school leaders build inclusive  
communities where every learner belongs.

I've had the privilege of sharing this work from  
Cincinnati to Singapore...and 1000s of places in  
between.

# Access Your Dashboard

*Everything you need is in one place — here's how to get there.*

**[ <https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/cama26> ]**

## **On your phone?**

Open your browser and type in the link above.

## **On your laptop?**

Paste the link in a new tab so you can follow along.

## **In the chat?**

We'll drop the link there too! Just click it!

# **In education, we've misunderstood autism for decades.**

*These misunderstandings have shaped practices that are  
harmful to Autistic students.*

It's time to name the myths, undo them, and create schools  
where every student is valued, included, and well supported.

**Enter...The Five Fs!**



F IS FOR

# FLEXIBILITY

*Sometimes schools demand **one** prescribed form of communication before giving students access at **any** form of communication.*

*But that's backwards.*

## THE MYTH

*Students must prove they have the capacity to communicate before being given access to tools.*

## THE REALITY

Communication is a human right, not something to be earned.

Waiting for 'proof' denies access. It's as harmful as asking someone to prove they need oxygen to breathe.

True communication is robust, reliable, and real, moving beyond 'I want' to advocacy, expression, and authentic connection.

Withholding AAC out of fear it will prevent speech is both ableist and deeply damaging.

**Respect the 'no' and 'I don't feel safe' IS communication. Honor it.**

# RESPECT THE NO

Teachers need to honor the nervous system regulation of students with disabilities

# RESPECT THE NO

Sometimes refusal is the only way a student can feel neurologically safe.

# For Fun...

*Rank these augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) supports from MOST to LEAST available at your school.  
(1 = most available, 4 = least)*

**A**

High-tech options  
(speech-generating devices)

**B**

Visual supports  
(schedules, choice boards, icon-based communication)

**C**

Sign language or gesture-based communication

**D**

Low-tech options  
(pen/paper, whiteboards, letterboards, yes/no cards)

**Drop your ranking in the chat! (e.g., C, B, D, A)**



F IS FOR

# FUNCTIONALITY

*Schools sort students with labels like 'high functioning' and 'low functioning' and set expectations accordingly.*

*You can't spell functioning without a big F-U to someone.*

# Flip the Script

*Which of these have you actually heard about an Autistic student?*

**1**

"They're not ready for the general education classroom yet."

**2**

"We need to set realistic goals we don't want to set them up to fail."

**3**

"They're low functioning, so grade-level content isn't appropriate."

**4**

"They need a more restrictive setting where they can get proper support."

**Type YES OR NO in the chat as we read each number?**

## THE MYTH

*Autistic students can't handle grade-level content. Functioning labels tell us what students can achieve.*

## THE REALITY

All students deserve meaningful access to rigorous, grade-level learning.

'Developmental age' thinking traps students in low expectations.

Too often, typical peers are told to 'shoot for the stars' — while Autistic students get goals like 'sit for 5 minutes without disruptive behaviors.'

With the right support and raised expectations, students rise and flourish.

**Labels like 'high functioning' & 'low functioning' are harmful, unhelpful, and outdated. Full stop.**



F IS FOR

# FREEDOM

*Schools say 'quiet hands.' They suppress natural regulation.*

*Students deserve the freedom to exist in their own bodies.*

# For Real Though...

*Take 30 seconds. Think about this honestly.*

*When was the last time you asked a student to stop moving, stop making a sound, or keep their hands still?*

*What were you asking them to give up?*

Now ask this:

Was that moment about the student's needs, or about your comfort with how they look, a feeling they weren't engaged or learning, that they would distract others?

**Share one word in the chat... or more. We want to hear it.**

## THE MYTH

*Stimming is meaningless, a problem behavior to be eliminated.*

## THE REALITY

Stimming carries meaning. It can regulate emotions, communicate, signal frustration, and bring joy.

Forcing 'quiet hands' sends the message that natural regulation is wrong.

Supporting stimming builds trust and well-being. Punishing it undermines growth.

The key is simple: know your student.

For many, stimming also reflects motor loops, not a limit on intelligence.

**Anxiety and sensory needs often drive repetition. That should never limit opportunity.**



F IS FOR

# FAIRNESS

*Schools pull Autistic students out for 'social skills training' and separate placements.*

*But real belonging can't happen in isolation.*

# Fair Warning

*What is happening at your school.*

**1**

Full inclusion with collaborative support (gen ed class, co-teacher or support staff)

**2**

Resource room pull-out for part of the day ("getting support" but missing class content)

**3**

Self-contained classroom (separate from non-disabled peers all day)

**4**

Separate school or program (outside home school, away from neighborhood peers)

**Where are Autistic students placed?**

## THE MYTH

*Autistic students need separate social skills programs.  
Segregated placements offer more appropriate support.*

## THE REALITY

Access to authentic peer relationships is vital. Friendships and interdependence matter more than compliance.

Social skills are learned in natural, inclusive settings, not programs designed to make students 'act normal.'

Decades of research show that students with disabilities learn more, belong more, and thrive more in inclusive classrooms.

Let's shift from eye contact to human contact.

**Inclusion is not a privilege to be earned.**



F IS FOR

# FACTS

*Schools have been handed a false story about autism.*

*Here are the facts and they change everything.*

## THE MYTH

*Autism is a tragedy to be fixed. Compliance-based systems, ABA, token economies , etc. are what Autistic students need.*

## THE REALITY

Autism is **not** a tragedy. Segregation, ableism, and deficit-focused approaches are.

Compliance programs reduce students to behavior charts instead of honoring them as full human beings.

Neurodiversity-affirming, strengths-based goals are the way forward.

Schools should adapt to students , not force students to adapt to rigid systems.

Disability is simply another form of human diversity.

**Classrooms should mirror society. Schools that reflect that produce better humans.**

# What the Research Actually Says

Students with disabilities learn MORE academic content in inclusive classrooms than in segregated settings.

Students without disabilities are NOT negatively impacted by inclusion, in fact, they benefit too.

Inclusive settings lead to stronger social skills, more friendships, and greater belonging for ALL students.

Adults who were included in school report higher quality of life, more employment, and greater independence.



***"Education is not a place to endure.***

***It should be a place to enjoy."***

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