Among public school students, 13% require special education services. Removal from the general education class often occurs up to 80% of the day—creating a divided community of us, and them, or have, and have not. Many of these students are exiting school without a diploma, without a strong sense of community, self-esteem, or personal agency. What happens to these children will have a lasting effect on their overall well-being and their ability to access and impact the world around them.

What would happen if we turned stigma into support? Invisible Disability Project and the Conscious Leadership Academy at the University of San Diego have partnered to research, and develop the PAL Program. PAL is a training program that enters the life of a child, parent, and educator to teach and reinforce a simple framework to reduce stigma and implicit bias, in order to build relationships and human connection. By incorporating this framework, we can create communities that overcome the barriers and consequences of stigma through relating, empathy, and connectedness.

There are 57 million Americans with disabilities—most of those disabilities are invisible. Invisible disabilities are part of the daily lives of school-aged children. What it comes to hidden disabilities, we lack language and frameworks to talk about what is unseen but very real for many students. This lack of frameworks leads to invisibility and excludes people from relationships and opportunity. Stigma is the root for many of the tragic consequences that impact students today. How can we relate to what we do not see?

PAUSE. ASK. LISTEN.

Slow down. Pause. Acknowledge others without judgment. Identify a somatic symptom and connect insightful language to create agency and power. Ask, or disclose when something unseen is going on. There is power in knowing when and how to reach out and ask. Asking is part of an open relatable and connected community. Actively listen and create space for peers to share in the unseen. Learn to listen empathetically from another perspective to help understand others.

Research suggests that when Social Emotional Learning programs are reinforced every day within the school culture, kids have better outcomes academically, socially, and emotionally. This means that parents, teachers, staff and students are stakeholders in a connected community.