

THE KEY TO UNLOCKING AN INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IS COMMUNITY

BY PATRICE M. KUNTZLER

A parent participating in the development of a child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) can be overwhelmed by the decisions that have to be made. For parents of children with complex physical disabilities, the range of educational options may be more daunting. General education class? Resource room? Special class? 1:1 aide? Special school?

Often a highly specialized school is identified as the "most restrictive environment" rather than "least restrictive." Perhaps in theory, or in a perfect world, such labels would be true. However, we all know that the level of true inclusion of children with physical disabilities varies from district to district. And, there is no "one size fits all" for children who have complex medical disabilities and have fragile health. Medical supports and related services must be part of the equation in making the decision regarding an individual student's truly "least restrictive environment."

Being part of a school community means more than simply participating in class or completing homework. It means learning

to participate as a member of the chorus, student government or a sports team. It means making meaningful contributions to others through service projects or learning how to become a mentor for a younger student. The level of full, equitable participation in school needs to be considered when parents and school districts make decisions about the education of children, particular-

EVERY DISTRICT, STATE AND COUNTRY HAS THE RESPONSIBILITY TO RESPECT ITS WIDE SPECTRUM OF STUDENTS.



EVERY CHILD AND YOUNG ADULT DESERVES THE BEST EDUCATION AND SUPPORTS POSSIBLE.

ly those with "low-incidence disabilities".

Our school, the Henry Viscardi School at The Viscardi Center, was created to serve as the highest quality educational resource to

severely medically fragile children with disabilities. The majority of our nation's public school districts are not presently equipped nor prepared to serve these children. And yet, schools like Viscardi are unjustly and unfittingly criticized as a 'segregated' setting with critics using this intentionally loaded word, steeped in condemnation of practices and experiences.

Debbie Cuevas, a parent of a Viscardi fifth-grader with spinal muscular atrophy (SMA) and ventilator-dependent, said, "We made the decision to send Dylan to the Henry Viscardi School because we wanted him to have an education with other students who were like him. Dylan's medical and educational needs have to be thought of outside of the box which is what happens at the Henry Viscardi School. They adapt the learning experience to suit each child's individual needs. I felt in a mainstream setting that his particular and specific needs might be overlooked or might not be met correctly, which would cause an impact on his learning." As other Viscardi parents state as well, embracing a culture

of disability identity is very much a part of their reasoning in choosing for their children to attend this School.

We have provided full school participation to students and their families in most Long Island districts, the five boroughs of New York City and Westchester County (NY). We are supported with a part-time doctor and four full-time nurses. In the last five years, our daily routine medical procedures have reached over 100 per day. Our medical staff works hand in hand with devoted special education teachers whose primary duties are to educate our students, and they work with physical, occupational and speech/language/hearing and vision

10 Questions for Parents to Consider:

1. Is there a medical doctor examining the child and reviewing the child's medical history to determine if the school can accommodate the child's required level of medical support?
2. Are there school nurses trained to perform daily medical procedures such as catheterizations, etc?
3. Are the teachers familiar with augmentative communication devices?
4. Do the physical therapists provide the necessary supports for students to become independently mobile in the school environment and in extracurricular areas such as field trips?
5. Will your child participate fully in the school curriculum, including art, music and physical education?
6. Is there an opportunity for students to engage in school-related organizations such as Student Council, or Yearbook committee, or Prom committee, etc?
7. Is having a peer group of other children like themselves important to your child?
8. Are there academic expectations for your child?
9. Are there opportunities for your child to see adults with disabilities working?
10. Will your child's evaluations be completed by professionals who are experienced with the characteristics of your child's disability?



therapists to support fully students in our school setting.

Most times, parents make decisions regarding educational placement after much investigation, as in the case of the Cole family.

"We moved our entire family 3,000 miles so that our son could have an experience of solidarity; actual role models he could emulate; and the promise of a real high school diploma that he could earn," shared Mary Ellen, parent of a Viscardi 12th-grader. "We searched long and wide for such a program and found it at the Henry Viscardi School. It's the only school of its kind that provides him with the experience of full inclusion on the basketball team, in the student body and in the science lab. Every other school we looked at (or he attended) was ill-equipped to provide that experience. The piece of the population pie that represents the orthopedically impaired is a sliver compared to other disabilities—it is also the most diverse in terms of what each disability and student brings to the table both physically and intellectually. The Henry Viscardi School has successfully prepared a generation of young adults to be contributing members of society at whatever level each student is able."

When people generalize about any group of people and, in the case of a specialized school, they question why students aren't in a general or regular education class or a self-contained classroom in a public school, that homogenization disrespects the uniqueness of each person. It especially disrespects the children who bring with them serious, life-threatening conditions that compromise their very existence. A highly specialized school gives them the best education possible and sup-



UNLOCKING POTENTIAL Above: A student receives instruction in the science lab. Opposite: Students collaborate with each other in a music class.

ports them medically. Students in these special schools participate in student government, adapted sports programs, art and music, field trips, senior proms and more. Viscardi's mission is to prepare students for life; to attend college, to work in society as a tax-paying citizen or community living, as they choose.



Dr. Thomas Hehir, Harvard University professor and former U.S. Department of Education's Director of its Office of Special Education Programs during the Clinton Administration, wrote in his evaluation of the Viscardi program, "The extraordinary culture of this school should not be surprising, given the mission set forth by Henry Viscardi of promoting opportunity for people with physical disabilities. This mission lives on in the school where, regardless of level of disability, Viscardi staff labor to take children from where they are to higher levels of achievement. This is



done by providing children with effective communication and ambulatory (mobility) systems, engaging recreational options and assisting with developing social relationships while at the same time providing a pre-school-12 educational program. This is an ambitious but necessary undertaking for children with significant physical disabilities.”

In a survey of Viscardi parents, more than 70% of parents responding reported that their child was in some other educational setting prior to enrolling at Viscardi. From the 2010 survey findings, “More than half of these students moved to Viscardi from settings in which they were included with typically developing peers. Some parents noted that inclusive setting had failed to provide either the social or academic support they anticipated,” Hehir’s report states.

The Henry Viscardi School is the embodiment of all that is inclusive. New Yorkers have the vision and commitment to offer its severely disabled students a meaningful opportunity for a life of dignity under the most difficult circumstances. This school also intends to continue sharing what they have learned on our campus about “best practices” with others locally, statewide, nationally and internationally. Every district, state and country has the responsibility to respect its wide spectrum of students. After all, every child and every young adult deserves the best education and supports possible. •

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