

# SCHOOL P



## and their only way out is... INCLUSION

*three tales from the front lines  
told by Deidre Hammon  
illustrated by Scott Chambers*

**We** happened to be tuned in when a local station came on with one of those tacky, heartwarming stories: Young And Energetic Principal Turns A Failing School Around. Since getting a fair shake for dis-labeled school kids is what I work at 24/7, I sat down to get a load of the latest lies. Instead, I got a shot of actual truth.

First they established that the school is a hopeless case. They showed it surrounded by low income housing units, and told how it has the highest transiency rate in the district, how it buses in more homeless kids from wherever they call in from this week, and how it has lots of kids who use English as a second language — and, last but not least, lots of kids who are in special ed.

Then came a live interview with the principal to hear how he turned this loser school into a star. That's where it got interesting. When the reporter led with the *unfunded mandate* questions, the principal's opportunity to badmouth the wicked No Child Left Behind law — he didn't bite.

This energetic young man was so enthusiastic about what he, his teachers, and his students had accomplished that he forgot the district policy of perpetually crying poor.

Instead, he about grabbed the reporter off his stool by the lapels, shouting, "No! No! You're not hearing me! Its not about programs or money or anything else! Its about changing your *attitude* to believe that absolutely *every* child in a school can learn, *every one*!"

"If you can *know* that, and then *act* on that, you find out how true it is!"

Before the show was over, he did recover and say, yes, we need the money. But the cat was out of the bag. Now we know that he knows, his teachers know, maybe the district administrator even knows, the truth: that when inclusion happens, kids get educated. What's more, this wild idea can work, in the principal's words, "to educate *absolutely every child*."

Someone please tell me that No Child Left Behind was the brainstorm of some non-partisan think tank, not a right-wing Republican administration.... *please!*

We are supposed to hate this law. But look behind the pity stuff and see what I'm seeing where I live, in Reno, Nevada: Inclusion is now the everyday reality for the majority of kids who used to be *placed* in self-contained classrooms.

There's a trick to it. No Child Left Behind sets up a ferocious

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**this is the brainchild  
of Republicans?**

**No Child Left Behind  
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actually learn.**

**what a concept.**

yardstick for schools, AYP — Adequate Yearly Progress. AYP is sending principals around the bend because these days, they have a much more important role to play than in the days before NCLB came along with its Accountability. Accountability requires every school to do whatever it takes so that kids *actually learn*. (Can that be a Republican concept?!?)

If their school is going to make Adequate Yearly Progress, principals have to know what is going on in every classroom.

And guess what principals like the one in the TV interview seem to be discovering — *Special Education is the weak link*.

They know it. We know it. Sped classrooms are staffed with folks who are poorly trained. Sped classrooms are almost always devoid of exactly the things that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act would expect to find there: textbooks, curriculum, and research-based, tried and true methods for teaching kids who have difficulty learning. That's what special ed is *for* — in theory.

Well, hell, advocates have known that for a long time, but now that principals have to show their schools making AYP, they have to put the principles of IDEA into practice.

If they don't? The district loses what's really important in the education system: money.

Thanks to No Child Left Behind, a whole lot of kids are getting the education they were promised. Sometimes even inadvertently, the way it happened with Jordan Filler.

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**Meet Jordan Filler  
of Reno, Nevada.  
His entire school has gone  
to the full inclusion model.**



**Jordan**

is a great kid who is like a lot of eleven year olds. He loves WWF wrestling and helping mom with her home day care operation. School has

not been Jordan's favorite place, probably because he has been confined to one of those self-contained hells.

After meeting him and his mom, I went through his records and came across a "criterion referenced test" (one of those NCLB-required tests we're supposed to dread). It's a hereVthe-curriculum-we-taught-how-well-did-you-learn-it test.

Please note that Jordan had been attending a "failing" school before we met. That school had made a sudden turnaround. But now it was deporting Jordan to the school in his home zone. (Principals are finally saying, "Sorry, only my neighborhood disabled kids — and not even them if I can get away with it.")

But the test in Jordan's file showed he'd gotten *amazing* scores for a fourth grader who is learning to count and how to put letters together to make words. He scored pretty high....

Okay, really high. Almost average.

Okay, the principal at his old school must have taken the test for him, so Jordan would look like a prize to the principal at the new school.

Since manipulation can work better than truth to position you for battle, and since they cheated first, I decided to use this test to our advantage. His mom, Janet Fisher, was with me on that. We wanted the new school staff to let Jordan stay in fourth grade. This staff had no experience with Jordan. His mom and I seemed like intelligent, likable types (okay, her a little more than me). Sharing these test scores with the team, we made the argument for no removal from general ed, 'cept a little bit of resource to improve his reading and math skills.

His Individual Education Plan (IEP) was drafted and Janet signed in agreement. We had a placement!

Jordan's new principal is a sharp and suspicious fellow. He grabbed the whole file and rooted through it. Other testing and the IEPs gave him a clue that this child is not going to help him reach Adequate Yearly Progress, but every time he makes noises, I wave the fake test score and say, "Really? Then can you explain this?"

Principals are like cops. They stick together. In response to my waving around what was obviously a fake test score, this one was not about to say, "Well, clearly this testing was faked by the last principal."

A few days later, Jordan headed off for his first day of school in the real fourth grade — WWF lunch box and a package of new pens in his backpack.

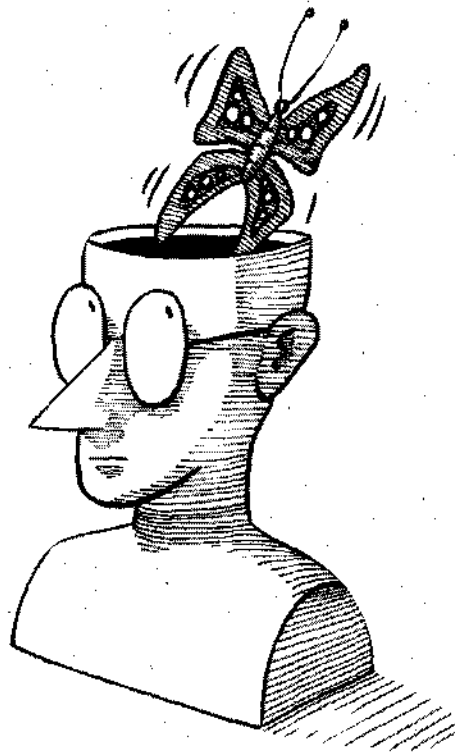
By the next IEP meeting, the school district staffers were stressed. They all knew now that Jordan's skills do not lie in the academic arena, but still no one spoke the words I would have expected: "retarded" or "cognitively impaired." Not even "developmentally disabled." Just a clandestine effort to change the IEP. Several fights broke out over whether or not to set goals for tooth brushing and

**Jordan was being shipped off  
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there will be **no more**  
pull-out classes-  
just teachers teaching  
in classrooms where  
the textbooks are.  
where the curriculum is.

they whine,  
***Its so unfair  
to the children!***



shoe tying, goals which guarantee segregation. Mom and I held our own against the onslaught. The meeting adjourned, unfinished.

At the final IEP yesterday, we structured the days for Jordan to include doing meaningful work in the school office, the lunchroom, and for various teachers, and studying ABC's and 123's, while picking up on all the other stuff happening in the fourth grade — a happy ending way easier than it would have been a year or two back.

Why? Because the entire school has gone to a full inclusion model. There will be no more pull-out classes. All teachers will teach in the general education setting. Where the textbooks are. Where the curriculum is. And where the majority of the children in the school will be from now on.

Okay, "community living skills classes" (that's code for segregated for kids whose IEP goals are shoe-tying) are the exception. Yes, the kids whose parents fall for "alternative testing" are stuck in that no-man's land of segregation. [See "Inclusion — What For?" page 17. -ed.]

But everyone else, and I mean *everyone* else, is moving into one place: general ed.

One thing we liberals are certain to hate about No Child Left Behind is the testing, testing, testing. But listen up's a minute.

The testing required under NCLB doesn't set kids up for a fall, it sets up *principals and teachers*. They lose their jobs if they can't make Adequate Yearly Progress with the children in their classes.

When push comes to shove in IEP meetings, the parties with the most at stake — school and district staff — will press for Alternative Testing for dislabeled kids. At Jordan's IEP, you would have thought we were in a political debate hall. When whining about how "*It's so unfair to the children!*" rose up from the sped staff, I called them on it. Tests are inanimate objects, I told them. Tests do not put pressure on kids. Adults put pressure on kids. Pressure is high for the *adults* in this situation, not the kids.

Sure enough, the special ed teacher admitted she puts on a spaghetti feed after the last day of Alternative Testing. She calls it her Whip Us With a Wet Noodle party, to commemorate the end of testing that doesn't matter to anybody. Alternative Testing means kids can't lose. They can't win either. They aren't measured; so

far as I can tell, nothing is measured. The tests are meaningless.

I had to jump in and say it. I had to give that damn Republican administration credit for the biggest shift I have witnessed in twenty years for the majority of dislabeled school kids.

"Look at the effect of this law," I said to the Sped Administrator, "three schools in this district have gone full inclusion, *the whole school*] All those LD and behavior kids are out of segregated classes. Returned to textbooks, and curriculum, and community."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the principal nodding in weak agreement. *What!?! Me and a principal agree?*

He did grouse about how his school didn't make adequate yearly progress this year, how it's not fair that Jordan has to take a test at the fourth grade level when he should be taking the test at the first grade level to measure what we are teaching him now. Since principals are not allowed to test that way, he thinks Alternative Testing is the solution.

I told him the Alternative Testing is crap, that it's useless for IEP planning or for evaluating anything. I reminded him that we want schools to be accountable for *all* kids. The poor test scores so many schools are dealing with right now, I reminded him, expose how badly we have neglected teaching children who are poor, or who have limited English proficiency or who are dislabeled.

He kept nodding. But-

Then Jordan's mom, Janet, weighed in with the tie-breaker. "I have to say this: Jordan has grown so much in just the last month and a half of school. People in our family have noticed. He's more mature. He wants to go to school for the first time in a long time. I don't understand all this testing stuff, but thank you all for everything. You have made a huge difference in his life."

Staffers responded with self-conscious laughter and thanks for the recognition, and maybe just a hint of pride.

But...

No buts about it. Not this year anyway. Jordan is one of those kids who was locked up in a segregated place without textbooks or curriculum, even abused by schools. Real academic testing? Jordan won't mind all those bubbles. He'll think they're great. All he needs is for someone to make sure he fills in only one bubble for each answer. Think of it this way: That means they can work on counting during his real academic tests.

No one mentioned the fake test and I don't really care.

Jordan is my client and if he's happy... hey, so am I.

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**can you take one more  
happy ending? turn the page.**

**what!?! me and a  
principal agree?**

**Ms mom weighed in  
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'he wants to go to school  
for the first time  
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she's the educator  
a la carte

**Judy Epstein,** a woman who hated me for a long time, is a friend now. Being a full-time full inclusion nut, I irritated every fiber of her being. I only ever saw her once a month in a women's group anyway.

She had embarked on a mid-life career change to become a teacher — a "special" teacher — no doubt with dreams of how she would one day decorate "her" classroom, and what she would teach "her" students (whether they needed it or not).

Last year she substitute-taught on a long term basis in a segregated class and it almost did her in. She wound up, during the last week of school, bawling in my living room because the inmates had stolen her laptop computer and made a mockery of her favorite project.

I tried. I really tried to help her get it. I think she told me to shut up.

Two months later, at the end of summer we met again and she threw her arms around me, shouting, "I understand!" She had attended a conference of some kind and somebody laid it out for her. Finally, she got it about inclusion and how necessary it is to eliminate segregation.

This year she has a real job with the school district, at a middle school in the poorest part of town. This was a school that had failed to make AYR. She told them, "No classroom please, just give me a cart."

She's the Educator-a-la-carte!

She travels from class to class with a cart-load of teaching strategies she uses to help the general ed teachers get reading and math concepts across to kids. She has a plethora of accommodations and modifications handy in that little cart. She carries the standards for all grades to bring work to the level of the child she is working with.

Is that beautiful?

Judy has a new colleague in every classroom. One who had eyed her suspiciously said, "I never thought special ed teachers were very smart, and certainly not helpful..."

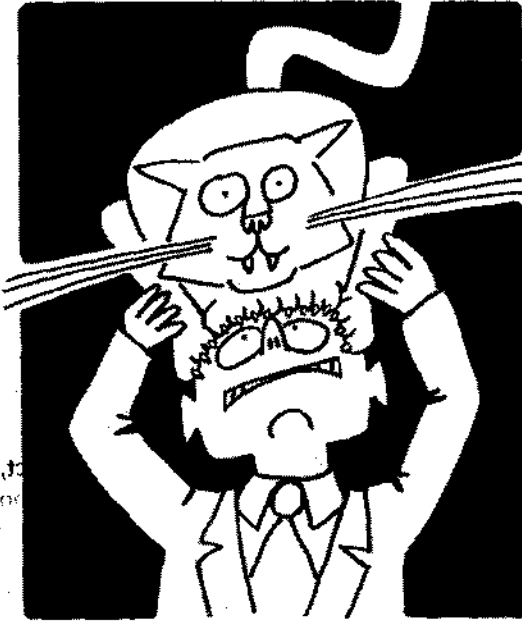
Then she smiled and added, "but Judy, you are great! I have learned so much from you." •

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*Scott Chambers and his wife Elnora work for inclusion as aides to dislabeled kids at a public school in California.*

# is it the only way?



*questions from the front lines  
by Christine Finckenor  
illustrated by Scott Chambers*

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**I teach the 'other kids  
—you know the ones I mean**

**while their peers are doing  
simulated stock market  
trading, my class is counting  
out coin combinations**

**What** is inclusion? In my fourth year of teaching an "inclusive" program for students with DD, this is a question I am still trying to answer.

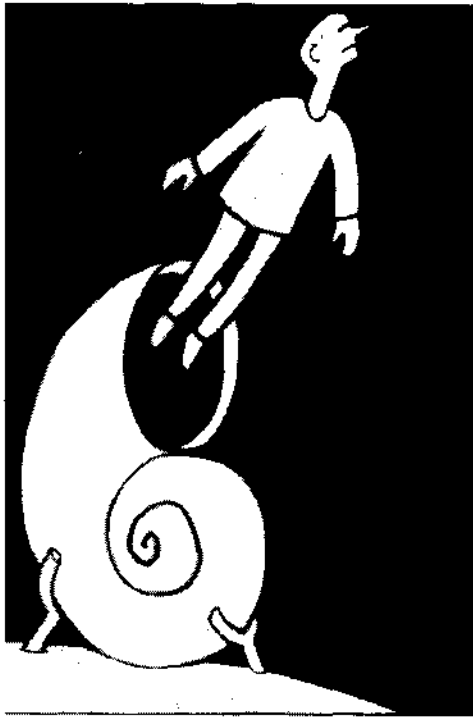
I teach high school special ed in a very affluent New Jersey suburb where the students drive better cars than the teachers. Luxury cars. The goal here is Ivy League. The path to this goal is littered with extracurricular activities of every sort, tutors, and sports.

My students are six young people who come into my class at around 15 and stay until they are 21. The bones of the program are: Functional English, Functional Math, interspersed with Phys Ed, Crafts, and Chorus, the three classes they take alongside students who don't have disabilities. Afternoons for my six students are devoted to vocational or community-based instruction.

We have a very warm, familial class. We cook, we joke, we enjoy each other. We have many years together.

While I came from a graduate program that supported full inclusion, the reality is not so compelling to me. I would not want the students in my class to be sitting in a chemistry class for "socialization" when they could be learning more pragmatic skills for their





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daily living and survival. And once the teacher starts teaching, what "socialization" is going on?

Is inclusion meant to be a signal to their peers: "I am here, I am part of your society, I belong just like you"? This is an important message. I do feel that message gets across in other ways, like traveling the halls to their classes, waiting in line in the cafeteria, using the bathroom, changing in the locker room.

I first worked with people with disabilities at a camp in New Jersey when I was 14 year old. That is where, over the course of four summers, I first drank and had sex. It was a glorious coming of age surrounded by an international camp staff, beautiful scenery, and tons of fun. The camp was also where I experienced another first: living with people with disabilities.

This place was like the movie "Meatballs", but more quirky. No planned activity was deemed inappropriate for the campers, and the more laughs we all had along the way, the better.

At that camp, I was able to translate the word "disability" into my own reality. I learned that just because someone uses a wheelchair does not mean she can't be a spoiled brat. I changed diapers on young men and women who had more pubic hair than I did, because that what had to be done.

I remember questioning why Jackie, the 13 year old in the black heavy-metal t-shirt, was even there — gosh, she seemed so *normal*. I saw flirtation, disappointment, ecstasies, friendships, sadness, and pubescent gross-outs, the whole nine of human behavior from a part of society still trying to get others to realize that they *are* human. I saw it all. In seeing it all, I saw no separation, no divide, no me, no they, just us, and... let's have *fun*!

Deep down, it is the camp counselor part of me that's the guiding force behind how I am in the classroom today. I want to have fun, for myself and with my students. It is a struggle to mediate this desire and get to what I sometimes view as the cold, hard learning — the skill and drill things.

The program I run began four years ago with just two students. Here I am, four years later, with my gang of six, coordinating this "life skills" educational experience. While their peers are participating in simulated stock market trading, my class is counting out coin combinations. Through the sublime and the painful, we stick together.

There's R., who used to pass notes to boys with her phone number, only to be laughed at. She is much more discriminating with her emotions now.

There's J., who brings in his Linda Ronstadt CD and sings along beautifully to "Blue Bayou". There's L, who bursts out with the most gorgeous laugh, and gets us all going. They are being teenagers in the best way they know how. Is it "typical"? I doubt it. Are they being "themselves"? Absolutely. Where do I intercept this honest self-expression with instruction? How do I teach "life skills" when every individual's life is so beautifully different?

**Not** to my credit, I do get concerned with how strong the message of belonging should be. The school's administration has been very supportive of the program, but I try to keep our class peculiarities under the radar.

Is that because I want these students to be "normal"? To learn how to minimize their yelps, mutterings, screeches and strange behavior so they will be more accepted? Don't we all have to learn that, growing up?

At the same time, I hate that anyone has to learn "normal."

Am I ashamed or embarrassed when they do peculiar things? Sometimes. Not so much for them, or for me, but for the whole damned situation. I hate that the cornerstone word of special ed looms over us: APPROPRIATE. Who decides what is APPROPRIATE anyway? I feel it's APPROPRIATE not to wear underwear sometimes, but God forbid I include that in my teaching.

On the job, I feel a strong responsibility to be an ambassador for disability, to explain, to present, to let it be. This keeps me turning over this question about disability in my head. Saying that someone has such-and-sucha disability is about as meaningful as saying someone is of such-and-sucha race.

It frustrates me that since my students are already labeled, they have to appear twice as normal as the most "typical" student to be accepted half as much. This is a draining fight.

By encouraging them to look and behave in a way that's contrary to their inclinations, do I perpetuate their oppression or preparing them for real life? Do I prevent my students from being themselves when I squelch their behavior? Or do I help them fit into the only role that society seems ready to accept them in right now?

I believe it's good that I don't have the answers to these questions because it means I am still questing, still striving to get it right. Yes, I believe I make a very positive difference in the lives of my students. I also believe I haven't found the best way to do it, or that I ever will. I just know I have to keep at it. I do not know why I am drawn to this work, but I am. So I continue.

I intuit, I cajole, I playfully scold, I dead-serious monotone, I laugh, I hug, I dance, I impersonate, I regale. I breathe deep, I ask for company and for help.

I don't know how I do it, but I do it. •

**Just because somebody  
uses a wheelchair  
doesn't mean she can't  
be a spoiled brat**

**saying that someone has  
such-and-sucha disability  
is about as meaningful  
as saying he's of  
such-and-sucha race**



CHRISTINE FINCKENOR AT WORK