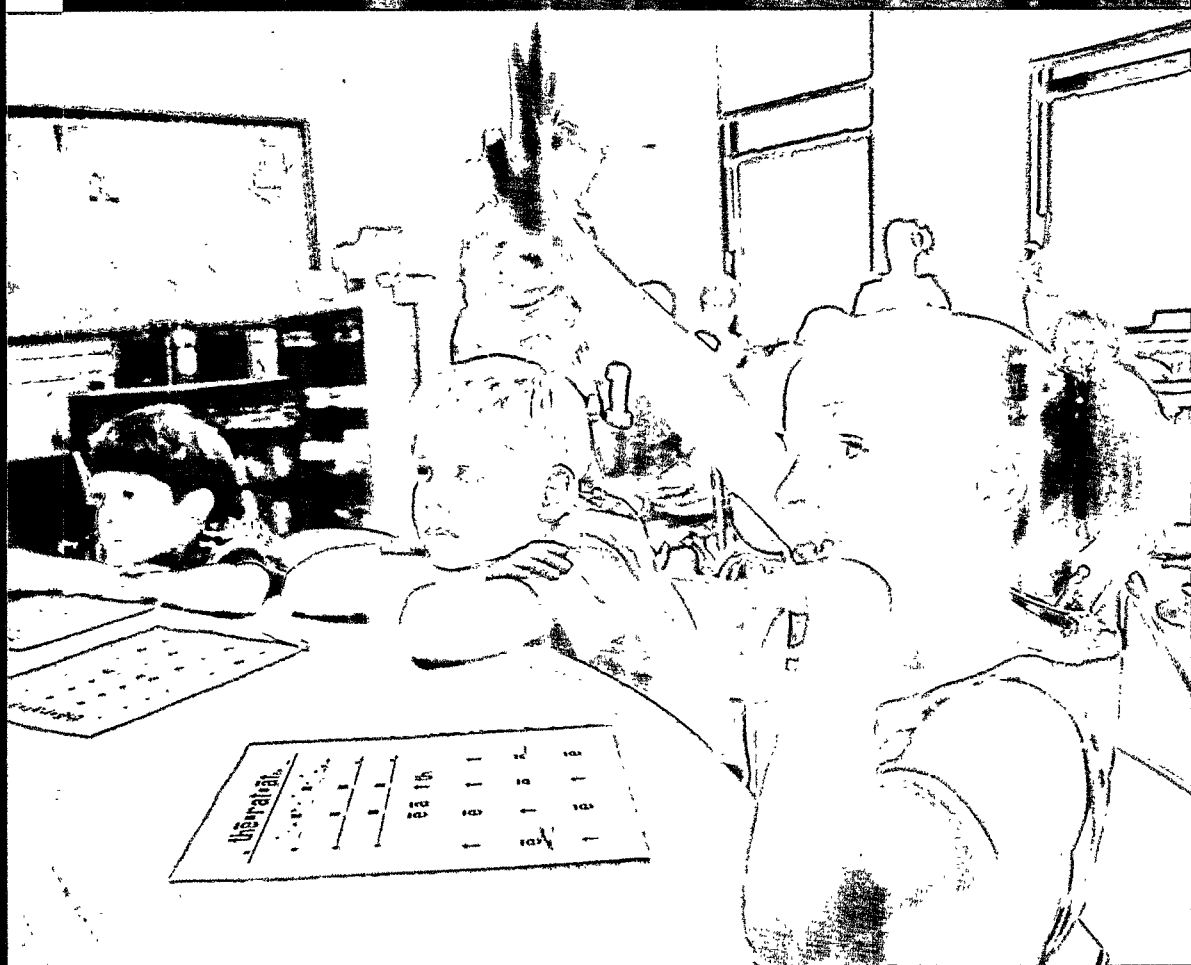


# What Works?

## MODELS FOR SUCCESS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

by Mike McLaughlin

---



Gray Laughrige Wells

**E**ducators face a number of challenges in working their magic with children with special needs. The primary challenge is the disability itself, which makes learning more difficult for these students. Other issues include legal mandates and budgetary constraints that often force service delivery into a less-than-ideal world. Yet educators across North Carolina are struggling to make special education work, and some are doing quite well at it.

Given the increasing attention to what doesn't work in education, the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research wanted to call attention to what works. Thus, we looked at four special efforts to serve children with special needs. They include: an innovative special education director in New Hanover County who brings a refreshing attitude toward problem-solving in special education disputes; a private school, the Hill Center in Durham, that successfully educates children with learning disabilities and wants to share its knowledge with the public schools; a statewide nonprofit with offices in Davidson, Raleigh, and New Bern that helps parents stand up for their rights when their children need special education; and the Rockingham County Public Schools, a relatively low-wealth school system that is moving aggressively to include special needs students in the regular classroom.

Wrapped up in all of these profiles is this question: Are there lessons for other North Carolina educators? Can the results be replicated by others who want to address the myriad challenges of special education? In almost every case, the answer is yes, though perhaps not in the exact form discussed here. The challenge lies in applying one solution to another situation. But then, educators of special needs children are accustomed to addressing difficult situations. Below are four examples of programs that work.

### **A Special Approach to Special Education: The New Hanover County Public Schools**

**W**hen Bill Trant graduated from Tulane University in 1971 with a degree in sociology, jobs were scarce. But Trant managed to land a job as a bus driver taking special education students to public schools in the Illinois suburbs. The first day on the job, Trant wrecked the bus.

More than a quarter of a century later, Trant

has gained a reputation for keeping the traffic flowing smoothly as special education director for the New Hanover County Schools. Part of Trant's secret is that he believes in the committee approach advocated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and its reliance on an individualized education program developed by parents and educators working together. "At the core is the idea that multiple heads proposing a way for a child to be successful are better than one head," says Trant. "There's a lot of teamwork. . . . Everybody has to give up something, but you're moving toward an end. It's like a football team. If you can't agree on a play, you can't score."

Trant's willingness to listen leads him to a willingness to try new things: a model school where every child with a disability is included in the regular classroom; a new school that is fully accessible to the disabled and promotes itself as a place for children with special needs. But as important as what is going on in the New Hanover County Schools is what is not going on — litigation. In three years on the job serving more than 2,400 special needs children, Trant has received only seven complaints that resulted in any outside intervention. Those seven cases were resolved through mediation.

"We haven't had a family seek administrative relief in seven years," says Trant. "A half dozen times, we've used formal mediation through the Dispute Settlement Center of the Cape Fear. It's successful because it values the interests of all parties and tries to bring those interests together in a similar direction."

Trant says he learned the value of mediation through working for a school system where litigation came first. "We won 13 cases in a row," says Trant. "After we were done, we still had to sit down with the parents and figure out what we were going to do together." In essence, says Trant, the school system won, but there were no winners because the parents were embittered. With mediation, Trant says, both sides win. "I think that's the strongest way to resolve conflict," he says.

In the New Hanover Schools, however, school officials work to resolve disputes before they reach the stage where mediation is necessary. At Codington Year-Round Elementary School, for example, a mother of a 7-year-old girl with moderate developmental disabilities became concerned about foul language and inappropriate behavior her child was learning from classmates. "The little girl was picking up attributes the mother had never seen before, and she knew the only place the child was

---

*Mike McLaughlin is editor of North Carolina Insight.*

exposed to that was at school," says Codington Principal Adelaide Kopotic. "She wanted to solve it by moving her to another school — to a teacher she'd been successful with."

Since the old school was 25 miles away, Kopotic thought that solution impractical. She proposed a compromise, and the mother accepted. The child was moved from a special education classroom to a regular classroom with children her own age. "We chose to put her on grade level with a different classroom teacher who was mature, competent, compassionate, and willing — with other supports," says Kopotic.

Codington is a new school offering a year-round schedule — so popular in New Hanover County that the student body was chosen by lottery.<sup>1</sup> To assure that any students who wanted could participate in the lottery, it was decided that special education services at the school would be determined after the student body was selected. A few students were moved to the school once services were determined, but most came to Codington

through the lottery process. The school's students performed adequately on state end-of-grade tests during its first year of operation, according to ABCs test results provided by the N.C. Department of Public Instruction. However, Codington was not among the top performing elementary schools in the New Hanover County system.<sup>2</sup>

Codington promotes itself as an all children's school, promising universal access and honoring the gifts and needs of all students. In the old days, Trant notes, special education might have been carried out in the old school downtown or in the trailer out back of a new school, so being able to choose a bright, new school building is important for special needs students.

"What's emerged here is inclusiveness," says Trant. Yet Trant knows inclusion — or placing the child in a regular classroom setting with appropriate supports, isn't for everyone. "You can have two children with identical needs, and one parent doesn't want that child in a typical setting, and the other wants that kid fully in there. They value that



Gray Laughridge Wells

kids learn from one another. . . . You've got to have the ability to respond to both."

At Codington, there are two self-contained classrooms. Marlyn Stillions teaches seven children with severe multiple handicaps, including cerebral palsy. Two teaching assistants — called para-educators — help meet the physical needs of the children. Stillions' students can neither walk nor talk, so their needs are great. One student lies on a mat on the floor, his arms and legs drawn up in a fetal ball, emitting a low moan.

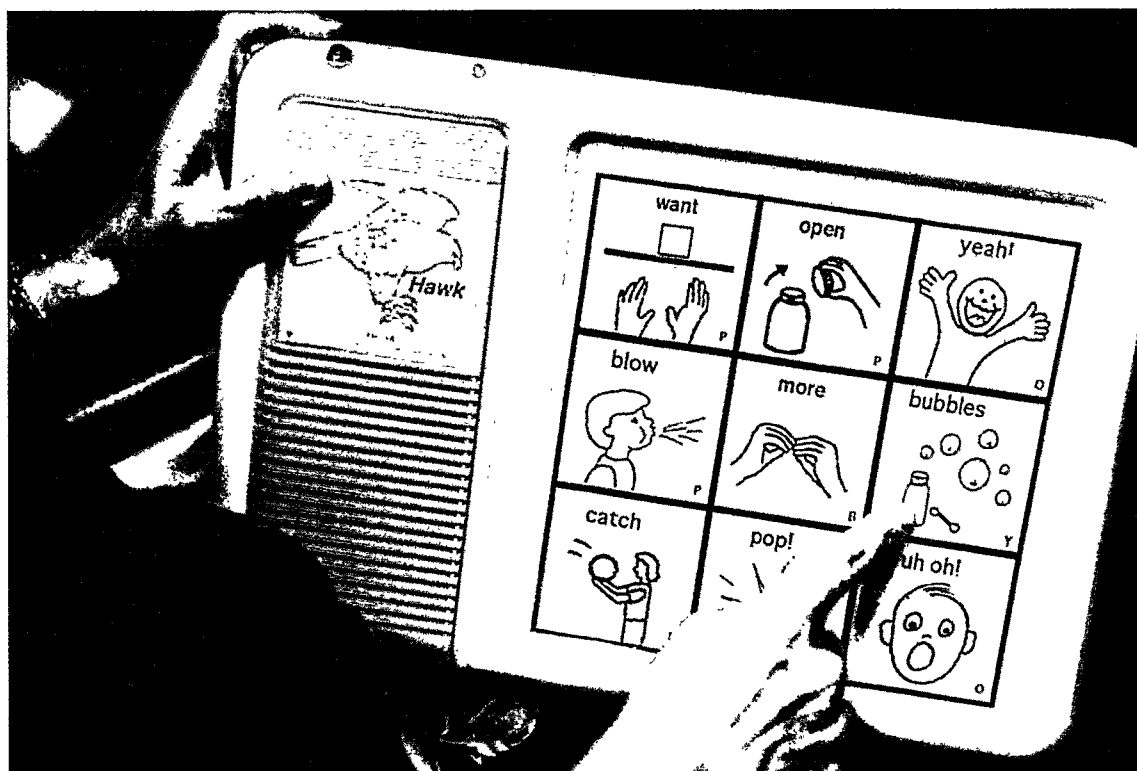
The room is filled with the devices and equipment intended to help these children learn — some specifically designed for special needs students, some pieced together from garage sales and discount stores. One piece of equipment common to children with communications difficulties is the Big Mack Switch, a fat, hamburger-like device that children can press to give simple responses to questions. Depending on where the student presses, the answer can be yes, no, or maybe.

By use of such devices, educators can get an idea of how much communications-impaired children are comprehending. "Receptive language is first, rather than expressive," says Stillions. "Maybe they are able to understand, but they just aren't able to tell you they understand." For a lesson in gender identification, for example, Stillions would hold up pictures of male and female children. "Are you a girl or a boy?" she would ask. "Eventually, she would look at the girl picture." Other devices range from the high-tech — such as special touch screens for a computer — to a toy farm set Stillions bought at a yard sale for a dollar.

The learning goals are different for these students. Students work on communications skills, gross and fine motor skills, self-help skills, and daily living skills. "Anywhere from being able to feed themselves to being able to tolerate someone feeding them," says Stillions. "You work toward these goals and after a year you say, we've done some things," she says. Academic goals could in-



Gray Laughridge Wells



Karen Tam

clude learning to use a switch for communications and learning about cause and effect by touching a window on a computer touch screen.

And while these children are in a self-contained classroom, they do have some interaction with students without disabilities. As many as 18 fourth and fifth graders volunteer in the classroom every day. "Four parents told us their child has already told them they want to be a special education teacher," says Stillions.

Stillions says it's remarkable how well the general education students at Codington accept her special needs students. "The children eat at the cafeteria every day. It takes us about an hour and a half, so we're in contact with almost every child who eats at the cafeteria."

While Stillions' students have contact with other students at lunchtime and with student volunteers in the afternoons, many Codington students with disabilities are included in the general education classroom for most or all of the day. A third-grader with birth defects and physical and mental disabilities participates in a first and second grade combination classroom. She is small for her age, and her abilities make her a good fit with the other students. Another student with cerebral palsy — formerly in a self-contained classroom

and a separate school — blossoms when placed in a general education classroom. "He has more potential than he was ever given credit for," says Janice Fineburg, a special education teacher who works with the included students. "So much attention was paid to the physical, but he's been with an ace teacher who has just pushed all year." Another student who is included is classified as mildly autistic. Yet another suffered encephalitis and has an IQ of 57 but is functioning well in the regular classroom.

For these students, inclusion in the regular classroom has led to academic and social gains, yet Trant believes some students may be better off in self-contained classrooms with more limited interaction with regular classroom students. The key is to retain the flexibility to meet the needs of each individual student. The danger in special education, notes Trant, is expectations can be lowered due to the student's disability. "We're celebrating all kinds of successes," he says.

While Codington School is doctor's office modern, Winter Park is an old-fashioned two-story school house, renovated and reopened to relieve school crowding in New Hanover County. Despite the fresh paint and disinfectant, one can almost smell the decades of chalk dust hanging in the air.

But if Winter Park is an old school, it's still a place of new ideas. And the school has gone the extra mile to accommodate students with special needs.

While the school is not fully accessible to the disabled — which leaves out some students with mobility impairments — it has fully embraced the idea that all students can learn. All of the special needs students who attend the school are included in regular classes, and the school employs two special education resource teachers to work with these and other students who may need extra help. "All of our students are in the regular classroom," says special education teacher Janet Rogers. "There are no self-contained classrooms in the entire building. It's a brand new staff serving all children."

Trant says Winter Park is a model school. "They showcase the best teaching practices in the school system," says Trant. The school draws from a socio-economic cross section of Wilmington, and some employees, including the principal, the assistant principal, and some teacher assistants — ride the bus back and forth to school with students to help maintain order and get the school day off to a good start. "Their philosophy is the school day starts from the moment [the children] get on the bus until the moment they get off in the afternoon," says Trant. "So do the learning opportunities. The staff

provides the support to make that happen."

The Winter Park approach to learning seems to be working. In 1997–98, the school had the highest end-of-grade test scores of any New Hanover County elementary school. The N.C. Department of Public Instruction recognized Winter Park as a school of distinction showing exemplary growth.<sup>3</sup>

And despite some accessibility issues, Winter Park has made a strong effort to welcome as many children with special needs as possible. When the attendance zone was determined, education officials scoured the neighborhoods to find children with special needs who could attend school closer to home. In the 1996–97 school year, nine specially equipped buses coursed the district, picking up 13 students with disabilities and hauling them to nine different schools. Now all of those students are served in their home school area, using no special buses.

Once the students arrive at school, they go to regular classes. Rogers and her colleague Marianne Lare move through the building, working mostly — but not exclusively — with children with special needs. Students who fall behind may be pulled aside for what is called regrouping. "The curriculum is designed to work with kids wherever they are," says Rogers. "In the first grade, I might take



Gray Laughridge Wells



Gray Laughridge Wells

four children. Two are labeled, two are not. But there's still a need."

The work load for the two special educators varies by grade, with few students identified as needing special services in the early grades and the numbers getting fairly heavy by grades four and five. Fundamental to the model, however, is making sure that the proportion of special needs to regular classroom students does not get out of balance. If it doesn't, the model works beautifully, these educators say. "We need so much less time than in a separate classroom," says Lare.

While much remains to be done to accommodate special needs students in the New Hanover County Public Schools, much has been accomplished. And Trant's willingness to listen and try new things is part of the reason. Also to be credited are the front-line educators who work directly with the students, and the principals of individual schools who provide a listening ear and problem-solving skills. The reliance on mediation when disputes cannot be resolved more informally also provides a model approach. Behind all this is a philosophy: "Children with special needs are children first," says Trant. "The education system

should teach them in this way. Special education is a means to get this done."

### **A Private School Goes Public with Its Teaching Methods**

**T**he Hill Center is a small (133 students), independent school and a division of Durham Academy with a 4:1 student teacher ratio (compared to a ratio of roughly 18.5 special education students per special education teacher in the North Carolina public schools) — and a mission to help children with learning disabilities achieve academic success. The school's reputation is such that it recently launched a \$5 million capital campaign to make room for more students. But besides pushing for bricks and mortar, the school has embarked on another campaign: to build a partnership with North Carolina's public schools.

Armed with a \$1 million grant from the Glaxo Wellcome Foundation, the Hill Center is pushing to share its techniques with other North Carolina teachers. The chief vehicle is a week-long summer institute at which participating public school teachers get a full-immersion introduction to Hill Center

methods that can be adapted to the larger classes of the public schools. However, the effort is a collaborative teacher training initiative that also involves the University of North Carolina and the education research organization SERVE (Southeastern Regional Vision for Education), a federally funded education research laboratory based at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Participating public school systems are paired with public universities in their regions to provide support for special education efforts, and SERVE is evaluating the effort to see how successfully the Hill Center methods can be replicated in the public schools.

A question any educator might ask is, are the methods worth copying? Educators who have scrutinized the program say yes. "They have a good model," says David Lillie, a special education professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with expertise in learning disabilities. "It works. It's effective."

Since its founding in 1977, the Hill Center has served more than 1,000 children from 65 schools in seven different counties. Students with learning disabilities such as attention deficit disorder and dyslexia spend a half-day at the Durham campus, then return to their home schools for the remainder of the day. Current annual cost is \$9,300 per student for the half day program, which focuses almost exclusively on academics. Expensive extras like food services, sports programs, and extracurricular activities get taken care of at the students' home campuses. "Most of our dollars go entirely into teachers so we can keep our student-teacher ratio down," says Hill Center Director Shary Maskel.

Relying on its small number of students per teacher, the school follows a philosophy of using drill, repetition, and overlearning so students can achieve mastery of material in reading, writing, and math.

Maskel says one area where students sometimes get off track early is reading. Since reading is fundamental to all aspects of school performance, the reading problem spills over to other areas, leading to frustration, failure, and damaged self-esteem. The school focuses on catching reading problems early, using what is called a "structured language" approach, in which students learn to attack and decode words by detecting consistent patterns in the language. This is in contrast to the whole language approach, which immerses the student in the literature without focusing so much on drill and practice in sounding out words. "Research shows that about

80 percent of kids will learn to read no matter what," notes Maskel. The other 20 percent, she says, need help with decoding the language.

Through the Hill Center approach, many students get their first taste of academic success, and the school tries to build on this success to promote the self-esteem of students. Often, the results are dramatic, particularly for younger students. "It's much easier to remediate a third grader than it is an eighth grader," says Maskel. Maskel's research shows students of elementary, middle, and high school age advancing in grade level from a half-year to as much as three-years after a year of intensive study at the Hill Center, with the younger students making the most dramatic gains.<sup>4</sup> The goal is to help students regain their academic footing so that they may return to their regular school full time.

Some 30 educators attended the 1998 Hill Center Teacher Training Institute, conducted at Glaxo Wellcome training facilities in Research Triangle Park. Among them were 17 public school teachers and administrators, including a contingency from Bunker Hill High School in Catawba County. Bunker Hill, located in the town of Claremont in the heavily industrialized Catawba River Valley near Hickory, is a far cry from the Hill Center, a division of the exclusive Research Triangle area prep school Durham Academy. Yet the two schools do share some common ground; both serve a lot of students with learning disabilities.

Bunker Hill High School Principal John Stiver believes there are lessons to be learned from the Hill Center staff. He sent seven teachers and staff members to the summer institute — including regular and special education teachers — and believes the benefits will be many. "They're being treated as professionals in a first class training facility. They're away from the school, developing comradery. They can support each other when they go back to school."

Aside from a field trip to an outlet mall and a Durham Bulls baseball game, the teachers turned students spent their days learning and sharing ideas. Among the activities were a few exercises intended to help the teachers learn what it is like to be on the perception end of a learning disability — the pupil's perspective. One drill involved trying to trace a star while looking in a mirror that reversed the image. Another got at auditory attention issues through a tape-recorder simulation of a mail-order sales transaction. The teachers were to write down a complicated sales order while the tape recorder filled the room with distracting sounds.



At least one regular classroom teacher said the exercise was an eye-opener. "It's making me have a much better understanding," says Bunker Hill science teacher Rebecca Wilkinson, who acknowledges her frustration with students who never seemed to "get" the material, no matter how it was delivered. "It's making me much more aware. I'm going to be much more patient and compassionate with them."

Stiver says the Catawba County school has a high number of students at risk of school failure and a high number of students with special needs. One particular area of difficulty is reading, and Stiver worries that many of his students will not pass the competency test required for high school graduation. "Many of our students come from homes where they don't have large vocabularies. They don't have people reading to them at home. They have a lot of reading problems."

While Stiver does not expect to be able to duplicate the Hill Center's success, primarily due to its smaller class sizes, he does expect the teaching methods to work. Stiver hopes teachers can implement strategies such as vocabulary building word attack exercises, oral drill, reteaching, and classroom management. He also hopes Bunker Hill teachers can learn to improve their recognition of learning disabilities among regular classroom students in order to implement strategies to help these students learn.

Teachers who attended the Hill Center Institute will pass along what they learned to their colleagues at Bunker Hill High. Further support will

come from the collaborative tie-in with Appalachian State University and its School of Education. "We'll bring out one or two things and let it go one or two weeks, then we'll bring the staff back together and discuss successes and failures," says Stiver. "Then we'll bring out one or two more techniques." Stiver sees this as a sort of peer education for teachers. "Teachers learn better from other teachers."

Other participating public schools included a Greenville middle school and a Durham elementary school. The Hill Center teacher training institute traces its roots to 1993, but the 1998 institute represented the first step in a five-year plan to create model programs in the Catawba County, Durham County, and Pitt County school districts where the Hill Center methods are used and the results are evaluated. The plan is to have an elementary, middle, and high school in each of the three participating school districts adapt the Hill Center model to the public school setting so students can be exposed to these teaching methods through a kindergarten through grade 12 feeder system.

Hill Center officials do not expect to be able to produce an exact replica of the school's approach on a large scale in the public schools, primarily due to cost and class size. At \$9,300 annually for a half-day program, the cost far exceeds the extra \$2,736 in state and federal funds allocated to local school systems for each special needs student. It's doubtful local appropriations can make up that kind of difference.

Lillie, the special education professor, believes

---

**Q: Many famous people were childhood stutterers, from Moses to Marilyn Monroe. I'd like to know how journalist John Stossel and actor James Earl Jones overcame the problem.**

**A: Both Stossel, 51, a correspondent on ABC's 20/20, and Jones, 67, perhaps best known as the voice of Darth Vader in Star Wars, were so ashamed of their stuttering that they often did not speak as children. Jones was aided by a teacher who, among other things, encouraged him to read poetry out loud. Stossel credits a three-week course in language skills in 1977 called the Hollins Fluency System, given in Roanoke, Va. "I still practice these techniques," Stossel tells us, "especially when I read to my children."**

**—"WALTER SCOTT'S PERSONALITY PARADE," PARADE, JUNE 14, 1998.**

---

---

## *Special Olympics To Bring Thousands of Mentally Disabled Athletes to Triangle*

**N**orth Carolina's Triangle area will play host to the 1999 Special Olympics World Summer Games. Special Olympics officials say the games represent the largest multi-sport event in the world in 1999 and the biggest international sporting event in North Carolina history.

The Special Olympics feature 7,000 athletes with mental disabilities from more than 150 countries, along with 2,000 coaches and 15,000 family members and friends. Special Olympics officials expect to activate an army of

35,000 to 40,000 volunteers for events attracting as many as 400,000 spectators.

The games, operating on a \$35.5 million budget, include nearly 20 sports, such as aquatics, gymnastics, and track and field. Events will take place in Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill, and Cary. For volunteer, sponsorship, or other information, contact the 1999 Special Olympics World Summer Games office at 1-888-767-1999 or 919-831-1999, or visit the Special Olympics Web site at [www.99games.com](http://www.99games.com).

### ***Women's soccer star Mia Hamm gives a soccer clinic for Durham County Special Olympics team members***



Blake Tsai

the public schools can duplicate some of the Hill Center's success by adapting some of the Hill Center's methods. But he believes it's going to take more than just teacher training.

"The schools have got to commit to restructuring how they work with kids," says Lillie. His idea

of a successful model would use accommodations in the regular classroom to help students keep up with content, combined with resource rooms and tutoring to give them structured, explicit instruction and frequent feedback in the basic skills of math, reading, and writing. Such strategies are hard

to implement in the larger classroom, Lillie says. While the half-day Hill Center model may not be feasible, students could get this kind of attention for a shorter period of time three or four times a week, Lillie says.

But Jean Neville, director of the Hill Center's teacher training institute, believes many of the lessons in helping children with learning disabilities will transfer to the larger classrooms of the public schools. "This institute is designed to be more focused on what would work in larger group settings," she says. "They can take components of ours but do it in a way that fits their structure." These include helping the students get more organized, imparting good study habits, and incorporating drill and practice into the daily routine. The workshops also attempt to help teachers recognize when a student may have a learning disability and to better accommodate these students in the classroom.

While attempting to improve how public school teachers recognize and reach children with learning disabilities may seem ambitious, the Hill Center staff approaches the task with gusto. "We're kind of a small agency to have such big dreams," says Maskel, "but the challenges are not insurmountable."

### **Parents Helping Parents: The Exceptional Children's Assistance Center**

Connie Hawkins doesn't look for advanced educational degrees when hiring staff for the Exceptional Children Assistance Center in the Mecklenburg County town of Davidson. The only degree she looks for is a M-O-M — someone who is the parent and advocate of a special needs child. Of course, Hawkins also would consider hiring a D-A-D, but few have applied.

The ECAC is a training and information center for parents of special needs children. "Under IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), every state must have at least one (parent assistance center)," says Hawkins. "We help families understand the law, provide them information about disabilities, and help them work collaboratively with school systems. Much of the work is done by telephone, since the ECAC covers the entire state with 16 employees in the main office at Davidson and two branch offices at Raleigh and New Bern. "All of my parent educators on the phones are parents [of special needs children]," says Hawkins.

And the phones stay busy. The center logs approximately 14,000 contacts a year, including workshops, telephone calls, and orders to the ECAC library. "It's everything from a mom who is pregnant and found out she is carrying a child with a disability to a mom whose principal has said, 'That child can never darken my door again' [due to behavioral difficulties]," says Hawkins. "The vast majority are educational." In addition, ECAC publishes a newsletter that reaches more than 20,000 people.

Because of their life experiences, these staff members are quite empathetic to the concerns of parents trying to negotiate the best education possible for their children in the public schools. Beverly Roberts, the center's outreach coordinator who makes sure ECAC programs reach a broad range of parents, has a 17-year-old son, Charles, with mild autism and mild to moderate mental retardation. Charles has spent most of his academic life in a self-contained classroom. Now he is being included a little more with regular classroom students as he prepares to make the transition from school to work. "He's going to one class now — successfully," Roberts says. In addition, Charles is working part-time to prepare for a job after high school. "He's doing some community-based training at the Pizza Hut," says Roberts.

Roberts says her son's experience with the public schools has been mixed. "He's had some incredibly good years and some incredibly bad years — and some spots in between years," says Roberts. Like any parent, she remembers the trials and tribulations of rearing a challenging child and trying to make sure he got an education. "As a kid, he was always getting away," she says. "He didn't like to be hugged, and he was always moving." Charles had trouble communicating with and relating to others. He also had talents, such as ice skating, roller skating, and bouncing on a trampoline. "Special Olympics really expanded that for Charles," says Roberts.

Despite in some ways functioning like a younger child, Charles is a teenager with a mind of his own. That can lead to the inevitable parent-child conflicts. Take the time Charles was participating in a summer program that required him to don a swimsuit each day.

"No swimming," Charles declared.

Roberts pleaded with him to participate.

"No swimming," Charles insisted.

Roberts packed the swimsuit with his school things anyway. "Charles threw the swimming trunks out the window of the bus — in the bushes,"

says Roberts. The experience taught Roberts that it is important to teach and encourage children with disabilities, but parents can learn too. "Sometimes we need to listen," she says.

Cheryl Strupe, ECAC's administrative assistant at the Davidson office, has a 10-year-old daughter Jessica with spina bifida. Jessica also has been identified as having a learning disability due to attention deficit disorder. For Jessica, the issues have been around access to school facilities. "The buses aren't equipped with lifts (for field trips). There's nothing on the playground she can play on. We wanted a swing. They ordered one, and now we have a swing and no frame." Yet on the whole, Strupe believes the school system has been supportive. "I haven't had any problems that haven't just taken a phone call or a letter to address," she says.

Strupe takes her involvement further than would many parents. She even has started an athletics program for children with disabilities. It's called Structured Athletics for Challenged Kids. The program features five sports — baseball, basketball, bowling, gymnastics, and soccer — and the children play every Sunday afternoon, year-round. Each child with a disability is paired with a child who is not disabled, so if there is a skill a child with a disability can't perform, he or she gets a helping hand. "We started with 32 kids," says Strupe. "Now we're up to 80."

The issues are different for Judy Higginbotham, a parent educator at ECAC whose daughter attends the Metro School in Charlotte, a separate school for children with severe disabilities. Higginbotham can help parents work through issues around educational placement for children with more severe disabilities.

---

***Don't laugh at me  
Don't call me names  
Don't get your pleasure  
from my pain  
In God's eyes we're all  
the same  
Someday we'll all have  
perfect wings  
Don't laugh at me.***

—MARK WILLS

"DON'T LAUGH AT ME"

---

Higginbotham's daughter has a disability called Turner's Syndrome. She is approximately four feet tall, has an IQ of approximately 25, and suffers from a degenerative muscular disease. Yet she is able to participate in some job training, was able to attend a summer camp, and went to the prom. Higginbotham is pleased with the education her child is receiving at Metro, even though it's a special school where all of the students have severe disabilities.

For her, Metro School is the most appropriate environment as required by the IDEA. And Hawkins, the ECAC director, notes that a well-designed special education program must have a continuum of options. "Anybody who says there is a cookie-cutter answer is not doing what the law says," notes Hawkins.

The experiences of parent educators such as Roberts and Higginbotham are valuable because staff members have learned firsthand how to be an effective member of an IEP team. The IEP — or individualized education program — is intended to be a blueprint for the child's special education program. Unfortunately, says Hawkins, many of these IEPs are not well done. "There's not enough training in IEP writing," says Hawkins, "and that's where parents put the most stock. "It's also where a lot of the conflict starts."

There is no mandated local IEP form. Instead, the local form must have certain components, including goals and objectives that are to be realized in the course of the year. "If the primary disability is academic, the goals and objectives will be academic," says Hawkins. "The purpose of education is to help the student become as productive and independent as possible. The IEP could address everything from the severely, profoundly retarded to the academically gifted in a wheelchair. The range is significant. That's why individualization is so important."

ECAC's mission is to work collaboratively with parents and educators to make sure that children get the services they need under their individualized education programs. ECAC's expertise and experience helps parents, who can sometimes be overwhelmed by the school system in disputes over how to serve the needs of the child.

Too often, Hawkins says, the parents feel they are working against, rather than with, the school system. That, Hawkins says, is unfortunate. She believes the law intends a collaborative process between parents and educators. "Ninety percent of the calls we get, the parents say, 'I really wish I didn't have to fight,'" says Hawkins.

"Unfortunately, it's become an issue of sides. There should be only one side, and that's the child's. There shouldn't be a parent side and a school system side."

## Including Students with Severe Disabilities in the Regular Classroom

Joy Nance readily concedes she's still a student when it comes to educating children with special needs in the regular classroom. Yet her relatively poor school system in the northwestern Piedmont has taken the concept of including children with severe disabilities in the regular classroom further than any public school system in North Carolina.<sup>5</sup> Nance is assistive technology/inclusion facilitator for the Rockingham County Schools, and her school system's work is often pointed to as a model for other educators who want to bring more children with disabilities into the regular classroom.

Nance eschews the term "model." She prefers to call the efforts of the Rockingham County Schools to include most special needs students in the regular classroom a "work in progress."

But special education teacher Anne Montaigne says major strides have been made at her school, Reidsville Intermediate, since the schools announced they were going to an inclusion model some seven years ago. "Now we have a new staff of inclusion believers," says Montaigne.

Inclusion is the education of children with disabilities into the regular classroom with supports. In Rockingham County, this typically means a co-teaching situation, with a regular classroom teacher and a special education teacher working together to make sure everyone's needs are met, and these professionals sometimes are supported by a teacher's aide. "People talk about dumping children," says Nance. "That's not inclusion."

The school system currently practices inclusion at some level in all of its 25 schools. Of some 2,400 special education students, only 110 are not in a regular classroom for 40 percent or more of the day. The school system provides observation sites and training for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, and Nance and other special education and regular classroom teachers regularly perform workshops to demonstrate model practices to help inclusion work. Nance began her career as a regular education teacher, but she also holds a master's degree in special education and technology.

At the 49th annual conference on Exceptional Children held by the State Board of Education and

the N.C. Department of Public Instruction in the summer of 1998, Nance's audience was charter school practitioners interested in how to serve special needs children better. Nance played the part of the teacher well, right down to her lapel pen — a handsomely carved, bright red apple. She teamed up with regular classroom teacher Kristi Harris and Montaigne, a special education teacher who co-teaches a fourth grade class with Harris. Nance and her colleagues crammed seven years of experience into a three-hour presentation, passing out candy at the break to keep the blood sugar up as the afternoon session wore on.

One clear message was Nance's commitment to inclusion as the first choice for educating children. The case she made for inclusion rested on six key points: (1) children have a right to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment; therefore, they have the right to have the regular classroom considered first; (2) inclusion provides better preparation for adult life; (3) children with disabilities who are included with their regular classroom peers exhibit improved social and academic learning from role models; (4) children with and without disabilities learn to accept each other for both their similarities and their differences; (5) included children gain exposure to normal experiences such as taking the end-of-grade test and pursuing the regular classroom curriculum — called the standard course of study; (6) inclusion of children with disabilities provides greater opportunities for friendship between disabled and non-disabled students.

Yet Nance acknowledges there are challenges to including children with disabilities and those without in the same classroom. Perhaps chief among them is coordination between the special education and regular classroom teacher. One problem can be a failure of the regular classroom teacher to recognize the special education teacher as an equal in the classroom. Another is deciding who will do what, when. A great deal of coordination must occur between educators who already are pressed for planning time. Tests must be modified, study strategies must be implemented for students who learn differently. Someone — usually the special education teacher — must make sure that the special needs students are "getting it" and participating at their level.

But Rockingham County education officials do not believe the special education students in regular classes are holding back their peers. Special Education Director Ann Brady says in Rockingham County, students in inclusion classes — with and

without disabilities — seem to perform better than those in non-inclusion classes on end-of-grade tests.

On the whole, the school system's end-of-grade test results were adequate but not exceptional for the 1997–98 school year. Seven of 21 schools serving children in grades kindergarten through eight show exemplary growth in student achievement as measured by the state's ABCs plan. Only one school in the district achieved school of distinction status by registering a composite score of more than 80 percent on end-of-grade tests in reading, math, and writing.

The challenges are plentiful, yet Nance believes inclusion can work and work well. Her own son Jordan is one example of a student who has blossomed in moving from a self-contained classroom to full inclusion. Wheelchair bound and with multiple disabilities from birth, Jordan has learned to read and write. Nance credits inclusion and his assistive technology for much of the progress. Her son also has made non-disabled friends. She re-

members fondly his having a few friends over to share popcorn and watch World Wide Wrestling on Pay-Per-View. For Jordan, it was no big deal. But Nance had a sudden realization. "His friends just viewed him as one of the guys."

The next challenge Jordan faces is a high school diploma. With all the progress he has made, Nance would like to see Jordan get more out of his public school education than a certificate of attendance.

Improved social and communication skills, better classroom performance, and greater acceptance by non-disabled peers are three gains Nance has seen in her own son and in other children in the Rockingham County Schools. "When I look at him and see the progress. . . . It can work for all children." One reason is that students without disabilities help the students with disabilities learn. "Peers are such natural teachers," says Nance. "You keep asking yourself, how are you going to help these kids? And you step back and the peers come up with the answer."

---

## Helping Friends

**H**i, my name is James. I would like to tell you a story about one of the best friends I ever had. It all started on my first day in second grade. I was in Mrs. Rountree's classroom. When I first walked in the door, I saw a kid in a wheelchair. After a few minutes, Mrs. Rountree told us that we had two special students named Jordan and Brandon. I was kind of scared meeting Jordan at first because I had never known anyone disabled before. Jordan was CP. He doesn't talk or walk. He got CP because he was born a little too early.

Mrs. Nance soon made a system where the boys would have partners. Sometimes when I was Jordan's partner he liked to play and get off the topic. Mrs. Nance would come around and tell me to get him back to the subject. She also told me that I should try to make him do as much as he could. One of the other things that I did with Jordan was being his lunch buddy. I really had to help him eat because he couldn't move his hands very well. I also helped Jordan in P.E.

*Editor's note: This letter provides a firsthand account of a Rockingham County student's experience with inclusion.*

He did kind of different things. Instead of sit-ups, he would do head-ups. Sometimes he and Brandon would have a race, and we would cheer them on.

I was in Jordan's class in third grade also. I was his peer helper. I still got to be his lunch buddy and work partner too.

I learned a lot those two years. I learned that even disabled children can do a lot of things and that you just can't laugh at kids because they are disabled. They can do a bunch of things. I also learned that disabled kids have to do different things sometimes and then the same things that we do other times. I also made two good friends. Brandon has moved to an Eden school, but I will never forget him. Jordan is in the year-round school program, but I still get to see him some. At Christmas, his dad took me, Jordan, and another friend to Greensboro to a lunch and a movie. My parents take me to visit Jordan in the summer.

I think that Jordan learned a lot from me too. He also learned that you can make a lot of friends disabled and non-disabled. Jordan and I will be friends forever!



*Karen Tam*

Yet she does not believe every student *must* be included. "My philosophy is that all kids need to have an opportunity with their non-disabled peers," says Nance. "I don't think all kids need to be in the regular classroom all day long, because that may not be the best way to meet their IEP (Individualized Education Program) goals, but they do need to be a part of their school community throughout the day."

At the Rockingham County Schools, there is a continuum. While many special education students are fully included, there also are classes in which special needs students are "pulled out" from the regular classroom for special instruction, and some students are in self-contained classes in which all of instruction takes place with peers with disabilities. Yet Rockingham County has carried inclusion farther than North Carolina's other 116 school systems. "We don't look at the label and say this is the program," says Nance. "We look at the child and say, 'What are the supports necessary to make this child successful in the regular classroom?'"

Can the Rockingham County inclusion experiment be replicated in public schools across North Carolina? The answer clearly is yes. The Rockingham County school system is not a wealthy one, and its inclusion program is being carried out with less funding than most other school systems receive for special education. But the commitment must run deeper than just adopting the latest special education jargon and dropping special education students into the regular classroom without the necessary supports. Restructuring must take place to make the model work, and teamwork between the regular and special education teachers is essential. Para-professionals and assistive technology for communications and other special needs also sometimes are needed to help students with special needs keep their heads above water in the regular classroom. Enthusiastic participation from parents, administration, and staff is critical if inclusion is to work. Yet where these key ingredients exist, inclusion seems to unlock potential for children with disabilities. This, combined with the legal mandate for educating special needs children in the least restrictive environment, makes the case for inclusion a strong one.

\* \* \*

A question mentioned several times in the case studies mentioned above, is, are the programs replicable? Indeed, this is an issue whenever scarce program dollars are applied to pressing social problems. Why not simply transfer what is already

known to work to a new location, rather than constantly creating new programs and repeating old mistakes? A report by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation points out that too many resources go to paying for program innovation and too little to what is already proven to work.<sup>6</sup> But it isn't always that simple.

What makes a program replicable? The publication *Common Ground*, published by the North Carolina Center for Nonprofits in Raleigh, offers a few pointers from a Philadelphia nonprofit called Replication and Program Strategies Inc.<sup>7</sup> A program should have: (1) clear and plausible aims; (2) concrete and understandable components; (3) data to support its effectiveness; (4) cost-effectiveness when measured against other programs in the field; (5) transferability to another site, and; (6) a network of support at the new location.

Yet another important ingredient is leadership. Where innovative, successful programs have blossomed, there typically has been a visionary leader with a strong commitment to making the program work.

Given the criteria mentioned above, how do the four programs discussed in this article stack up? While none can expect a perfect score, each offers some degree of replicability. And even those programs that are not fully replicable may provide a rich source of ideas for special educators.

The informal, open-minded approach to dispute resolution in the New Hanover County Public Schools with reliance on mediation where other measures fail seems superior to more rigid approaches that have failed elsewhere. The program passes the test on cost since mediation is far cheaper than litigation. It has a track record of effectiveness, with seven successful mediations and no parents seeking more aggressive administrative remedies. Whether the approach can be duplicated elsewhere depends upon the receptiveness of school administrators at the new site to the more informal approach. In other words, leadership that believes in this approach to dispute resolution is crucial to making it work. Yet mediation, as practiced by the New Hanover County School system, provides a sound alternative to more expensive and divisive dispute resolution processes.

The Hill Center does not suggest that its model can be precisely replicated in the public schools due to the Center's low student-teacher ratio. Yet some of the school's teaching methods may transfer to larger groups, and the public schools can provide smaller student-teacher ratios for at least part of the school day. And Hill Center tips to help students



build better study habits and improve their time management skills can work anywhere. In addition, Hill Center efforts to raise awareness of learning disabilities among teachers can lead to earlier recognition and better accommodation of these students in the classroom. The Hill Center experiment in Catawba, Durham, and Pitt counties bears watching to see if it produces better results in public school classrooms.

Local school systems might also do well to emulate the parent facilitator program operated by the Exceptional Children Assistance Center. Adding a parent facilitator to the payroll has been tried successfully in the San Diego, Calif., schools to help parents negotiate the complexities of special education law. Such an approach may lessen the adversarial aspects of the relationship between parents and educators and promote teamwork.

Rockingham County's compassionate commitment to including students with disabilities in the regular classroom provides a positive model of success. The approach is being undertaken on a modest public school budget, and with support and commitment from educators and parents, it can be transferred to other school districts.

All four examples — the New Hanover County Public Schools, the Hill Center, ECAC, and the Rockingham County Public Schools — provide models for what can be accomplished when proper attention is paid to educating children with special

needs. Properly cultivated in new soil, these ideas might take root and grow. ☐☐

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For more on year-round schools in North Carolina, see Todd Silberman and John Charles Bradbury, "Year-Round Schools: N.C. School Systems Test the Waters," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 17, No. 1, May 1997, pp. 2-41.

<sup>2</sup>Codington Elementary School students registered a composite score of 72.4 on state end-of-grade tests in reading, math, and writing, a performance judged adequate by the N.C. Department of Public Instruction.

<sup>3</sup>Winter Park Elementary School's composite performance score was 88.1 for the 1997-98 school year. The score takes into account state end-of-grade tests in reading, math, and writing.

<sup>4</sup>Sharon Maskel and Rebecca Felton, "Analysis of Achievement at the Hill Learning Development Center: 1990-94," in *Clinical Studies of Multi-Sensory Structured Language Education for Students with Dyslexia and Related Disorders*, International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council, Salem, Oregon, 1995, pp. 129-137.

<sup>5</sup>For the most recent work by the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research on the relative wealth of the state's 117 school systems, see Mebane Rash Whitman, "Center Update: The Right to Education and the Financing of Equal Educational Opportunities in North Carolina's Public Schools," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 17, No. 1, May 1997, pp. 42-71.

<sup>6</sup>Carol D. Rugg, "Replication: Sowing Seeds of Hope," the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Flint, Mich., special section reprint from 1990 annual report, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>Laura Kujawski, "Replication: Opening Another Door," *Common Ground*, N.C. Center for Nonprofits, Raleigh, N.C., September-October 1997, p. 8. For more on replication, contact Replication and Program Strategies, Inc., 1 Commerce Square, 2005 Market St., Suite 900, Philadelphia, PA, 19103. Phone: (215) 557-4482.



Gray Laughridge Wells