

# Disabled want to be included

By William C. Kashatus

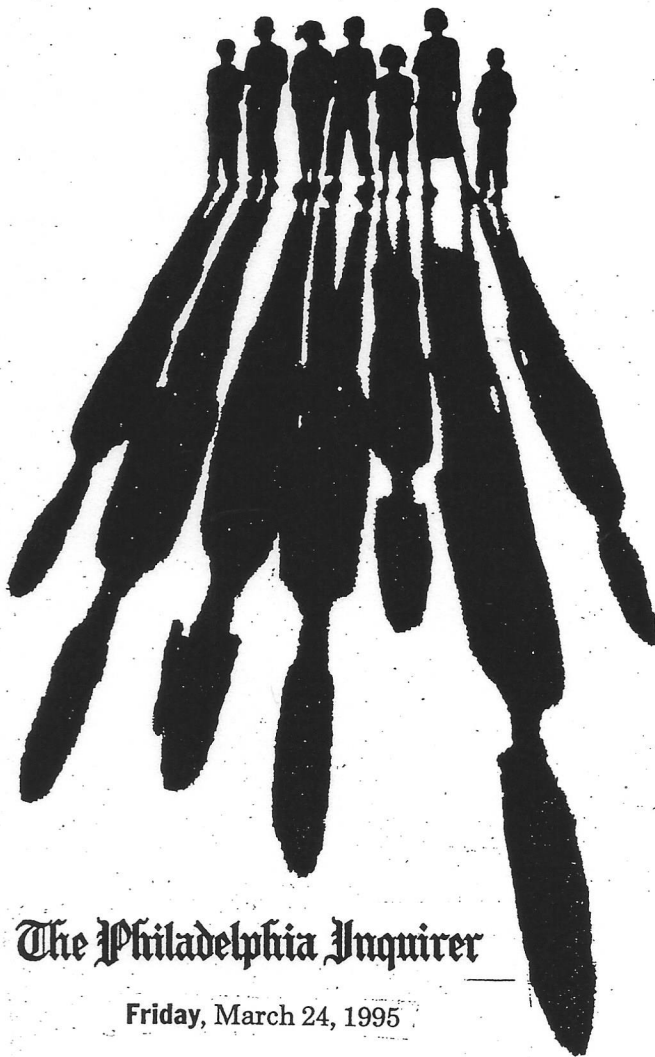
In 1902, when Peter Widener, a prominent Philadelphia entrepreneur, established a school to "help and hearten" physically handicapped children, the disabled were largely considered objects of charity. The moral and educational philosophy of the time period emphasized that their education should be one of *de facto* exclusion or segregation in separate classrooms.

Nearly a century later our society has made tremendous progress in the way we view disability. No longer do we consider the disabled "objects of charity," but as a distinct minority that seeks and deserves full participation and integration into all aspects of society. Yet the education of those students identified as "handicapped" continues to be an extremely volatile concern. At issue is whether children with disabilities should join their non-disabled peers in "inclusive" classrooms.

According to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142) passed in 1975, all children regardless of disability are guaranteed a free and appropriate public education in "the least restrictive environment" and "to the maximum extent appropriate." In response to this federal law, most states created categorical programs ranging from full inclusion in regular classrooms to separate schools for children with a particular disability, such as mental retardation or behavior disorders. By the autumn of 1993, almost every state was implementing inclusion at some level with questionable success.

Opponents of inclusion argue that students with disabilities are better served in separate special education classrooms because they *are* different from their non-disabled peers and require more individualized instruction with a specially trained staff. They consider inclusion a "cruel sales pitch" that will only serve to increase the stigma of failure and diminish personal self-esteem among disabled students.

Advocates, on the other hand, argue that labeling and segregation are inherently bad and that students with disabilities are not different from non-disabled students in any meaningful way. Moreover, there is a consensus among advocates that many students in special education are not, in fact, disabled but are placed there by faulty



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referral procedures and questionable evaluations. Thus they stress that these students with minor disabilities would be much better served in regular classrooms where teachers have higher expectations.

To be sure, both groups have valid concerns that cannot be easily dismissed. If nothing else however, both sides agree that we need better research on what works instructionally for students with different educational needs before inclusion can be more fully accepted or rejected. That is why the Widener Memorial School has, over the last few years, begun to redefine the educational opportunities it offers its students.

then why not create greater opportunities for these types of learning partnerships? Ultimate the education of our children — disabled a non-disabled — is an issue of values. It forces to ask the difficult questions: Do we value children equally? Are we adequately preparing our children to enter the larger society with sense of compassion and understanding for differences among human beings? If not, then we not begin to try?

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Widener, a special educational institution which is part of the Philadelphia Public School System, has successfully transcended the "politics of inclusion" by pursuing learning partnerships with other public and private schools including Central High School, the Episcopal Academy, Germantown High School, Howe Elementary School and Penn Charter. The operating assumption is that Widener's students — who possess a wide range of cognitive and physical disabilities, including cerebral palsy, spina bifida, muscular dystrophy, neuromuscular and congenital defects — can make a tremendous contribution to the moral education of their non-disabled peers. In return, the non-disabled students offer their services for tutoring, physical therapy or peer support.

Whether it be in collaborating on a writing project or competing in a basketball game, the fellowship that results between these two groups of students has laid the foundation for a better understanding and respect for the disabled.

Widener refers to these learning partnerships as a "reciprocal relationship" because both parties benefit from the experience. At Penn Charter, we refer to the partnership as "community service." But it is much more than that. For those of us who have had the opportunity to become involved — students as well as teachers — this partnership has become more than a function; it is what we do as a Quaker school, but also a function of who we are as human beings. Often I have heard our students say such things about their Widener experiences: "Those kids are just like us; I almost forgot that they were handicapped."

If the classroom is indeed a microcosm of society where most of the important lessons are to be learned,