

# Don't shut out kids who have disabilities



NICHOLAS Vaughan is a bright-eyed, blond-haired 3-year-old with a contagious smile. He loves trains, piggy-

back rides from his big-sister Hallie and playing with kids in the neighborhood. Sometimes it's difficult to keep up with them, though.

Nicholas struggles with a disability called proximal femoral focal deficiency. He was born with a short left thighbone as well as an underdeveloped hip and knee. He's already had two reconstructive surgeries to prepare his left leg for a prosthetic. In the meantime, he manages to navigate with a walker, though he prefers racing along on his knees.

Fifty years ago, Nicholas would be dismissed by our society because of his physical limitations. He would be isolated from non-disabled children and sent to school at an institution because the moral and educational philosophy of the time period emphasized "de facto exclusion" or the segregation of the handicapped.

Today, the disabled are considered a minority that seek and deserve integration into society.

But there are still questions about whether disabled children should join their non-disabled peers in "inclusive classrooms."

According to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act passed in 1975, all children regardless of disability are guaranteed a free and appropriate public education in the "least restrictive environment" and "to the maxi-

## COMMENTARY

WILLIAM C.  
KASHATUS

imum 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 behavioral disorders. The programs have experienced mixed success.

Inclusion opponents argue that students with disabilities are better served in separate special education classrooms because they 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 disabled students' self-esteem.

Advocates argue that labeling and segregation are bad and that students with disabilities are not different from non-disabled students in any meaningful way.

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 fully accepted or rejected.

Nicholas will present an especially difficult dilemma when he is ready to enter school.

While Nicholas was born with a physical disability, he does not have the mental or behavioral

disorders that are common with such a congenital defect. He is exceptionally intelligent.

Ask him about his short limb. Nicholas will show you the scar that extends from his waist to his knee. He talks about the surgeries in a matter-of-fact way that leaves the listener in awe, not only because of the obvious pain he endured but because he is so articulate for a 3-year-old.

Whether he can succeed in an inclusive classroom will depend on the willingness of his peers to treat him as an equal and the ability of his teachers to address his intellectual needs.

Segregated public school classrooms cannot always challenge an intellectually gifted student like Nicholas because of the behavioral demands of other disabled pupils.

In addition, private schooling for the disabled is prohibitively expensive, especially for Nicholas' parents, who've already made great financial sacrifices to address his needs and will continue to do so.

A gifted, physically disabled child like Nicholas forces us to ask the difficult questions.

Do we value all children equally? Are we adequately preparing our children to enter society with a sense of compassion and understanding for differences among human beings? If not, then why not begin to try?

William Kashatus teaches at Luzerne County Community College. A benefit concert for Nicholas will be held at the River Street Jazz Café, Plains Township at 6 p.m. Sunday. For more information, call Nicole Saporto at 740-0504.

TIMES  
LEADER