The School of Education’s longtime commitment to inclusive learning ensures that all people with disabilities have the opportunity to succeed

By Margaret Costello

People with disabilities have historically been defined by what they can’t do: A blind person can’t see, a paraplegic can’t walk, and a person with Down syndrome can’t perform complex thinking activities. For more than half a century, researchers in SU’s School of Education have worked to change society’s perceptions of people with disabilities by creating innovative teaching methods to cultivate individuals’ unique strengths. “Many of our faculty are nationally recognized pioneers and leaders in the field of disabilities because they have discovered ways to adapt their teachings so the child can flourish,” says Corinne Smith ’67, G’73, interim dean of the School of Education and a professor of teaching and leadership. “Our faculty work under the philosophy that individuals with disabilities have far more potential than previously thought.”

Professors in the school have led progressive—and sometimes controversial—campaigns to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities. Those efforts include urging policy makers to close state institutions for the mentally retarded, training caregivers to help facilitate greater communication for people with severe disabilities, and conducting research to improve overall health. The School of Education has also prepared thousands of new teachers who enter school districts across the country ready to initiate inclusionary practices and promote the philosophy that students of all abilities can learn together and from each other.

That goal of helping every student prosper in a traditional classroom setting—a concept known as inclusion—drives many professors’ research. And their accomplishments in this area haven’t gone unrecognized. SU’s special education program annually ranks in or near the top 10 by U.S. News & World Report, and the School of Education appears near the top 25 schools in the magazine’s ranking based on reputation by deans and superintendents.

The school has also developed new academic majors and programs for future
Student teacher Mary Ellen Meggesto '02 assists Aaron Alexander, a third-grader with autism, in an inclusive classroom at Edward Smith Elementary School in Syracuse.
teachers. For example, it was the first of 1,200 teacher preparatory schools in the nation to create an inclusionary education major that certifies students in both elementary and special education. “Ten percent of the U.S. school population is identified as disabled,” Smith says. “Our future teachers need to learn how to adapt their instruction to these children’s learning challenges.”

The school’s disabilities studies program was one of only two in the country when it began five years ago. Today, universities nationwide consult SU faculty for assistance in launching similar programs. The new academic field is emerging much like African American studies and women’s studies did a few decades ago. Students in the program examine disabilities in social, political, economic, and cultural contexts. “SU has an extraordinary collection of professors, staff members, and students who think progressively about disability,” says Michael Schwartz, a doctoral student in disabilities studies, who is deaf. “It has a powerful and organized constituency that will work to effectuate changes in how we think about disability.”

Syracuse University has responded to the growing interest in the field by sponsoring conferences and participating in informational projects to raise disability awareness. The School of Education, for instance, recently received a $600,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education to create curricula for middle and high schools that incorporate the historic accomplishments of Americans with disabilities. “A lot of what we do today at the University reflects our history and traditions,” says Steve Taylor G’77, professor of cultural foundations. “In terms of research and the School of Education’s academic program, Syracuse has been at the forefront for decades, not only promoting inclusion as a human value, but also developing strategies on how to make inclusion happen.”

In 1971—two decades before federal lawmakers would begin to remedy widespread discrimination against people with disabilities—Syracuse University faculty brought to light the treacherous living conditions and legally sanctioned human abuse of institutionalized Americans. School of Education professor (and future dean) Burton Blatt had just founded the Center on Human Policy to expose the harsh conditions he discovered while researching a book called Christmas in Purgatory. The photographic exposé depicted unsanitary and inhumane living conditions at four state-supported institutions for the mentally retarded in the Northeast. The University’s new center focused on calling public attention to abuses that Blatt had witnessed in the institutions and on finding humane living alternatives for this population.

Taylor, a graduate student in sociology at the time, took a course offered through the center that required all students to visit a state institution for the mentally retarded. “I walked into this institution with no experience in disabilities at all, and saw
rooms packed with 70 to 80 people, half of them naked and some of them banging their heads against the wall,” says Taylor, now director of the center. “It was disgusting. I thought, ‘I can’t believe we do this to people.’ That experience threw me into the field. After seeing such human suffering and abuse, it’s hard to walk away.”

Three decades later, Taylor leads the center in its fight against centuries-old stereotypes of people with mental and physical disabilities once commonly accepted by doctors, scientists, and academics alike. “In the early 1900s, there were popular theories about people with disabilities,” Taylor says. “They were called feeble-minded or morons and considered criminal. Such attitudes don’t change overnight. It’s a tremendously long process.”

By the early ’70s, many children with disabilities still weren’t allowed to attend public schools. So Syracuse University established the Skytop School to prepare local children for the time when that would change. In 1975, federal legislation was passed guaranteeing every student a place in public schools. However, students with disabilities were separated into special education classrooms for most of the day and excluded from many of their peers’ activities. “The thinking in special education used to be that you put kids in these totally isolated special classes, and you’d teach them how to live in the community,” Taylor says. “You don’t learn to be part of a community by being excluded from the community.” After witnessing these inequalities in educational experiences, staff from the Center on Human Policy and other faculty in the School of Education created curricula for classroom teachers to educate students about disabilities and promote positive attitudes about including students with disabilities in the traditional classroom.

The Center on Human Policy also identifies model programs and innovative ways to include people with disabilities in community activities. “Our research focuses on trying to find agencies that are doing a good job of fully integrating these people into society,” Taylor says. “We typically conduct site visits at those places, document what they’re doing, and share that information with policy makers and people with disabilities and their family members.”

Taylor says one of the center’s greatest accomplishments was the 1998 closing of the Syracuse Developmental Center, a state institution for the mentally retarded. The Center on Human Policy had advocated its closure for decades, and urged state lawmakers to support more inclusive residential home settings for those at the institution. “When I see current challenges, I remind myself that closing Syracuse Developmental seemed hopeless, but we did it,” Taylor says. “We then assisted the state in finding homes in the community for the institution’s 500 residents.”

The Center on Human Policy remains committed to its mission of educating and promoting human rights for people with disabilities. For example, this spring the center sponsored a statewide conference in California that drew more than 600 participants and explored the benefits of deinstitutionalization and inclusion. “For the past several years, California has had bitter controversies over closing state institutions,” Taylor says. Through the conference, center staff members were able to explain the importance of including people with disabilities in community living and offering effective ways to do so.

“Our communities and schools are enriched by including children and adults with disabilities,” Taylor says. “We learn from people who are different from us. We’ve seen that in places where people with disabilities are truly included, people learn to be more tolerant and accepting of each other. A democracy is about learning to live together and learning to value each other as citizens, even though we’re different.”

The efforts of SU researchers are having a tangible impact on the lives of people with disabilities. Take Sue Rubin, for instance. For the first 10 years of her life, most people thought her brain hadn’t developed beyond that of a 2-year-old. Her eyes would wander, her body would jerk in spasms, and she’d utter unintelligible sounds over and over.

In reality, Rubin has autism, an incapacitating developmental disability disorder characterized by language dysfunction and reclusive behavior. Thanks to a method introduced in the United States by School of Education professor Douglas Biklen, some people like Rubin have found a way to give voice to their thoughts. The method—called facilitated communication—can be used by people with a variety of disabilities to communicate. In facilitated communication, a trained aide supports the arm of a person with severe speech and motor disabilities and assists that person as he or she attempts to point or type. Rubin, who is now a student at Whittier College in California, first broke through the silence by using the method, and has since learned to type independently. The method, proven successful in isolated cases throughout history, received much criticism from modern academics because it is possible for the aide to influence or create the movements of the person with a disability, raising questions about the true authorship of the communication.

However, facilitated communication can be effective, says Biklen, who has studied the method for a decade as head
of SU’s Facilitated Communication Institute. “We’re discovering that people’s performance can improve through facilitated communication,” Biklen says.

“With practice over a number of years, individuals can become much more proficient in their motor performance.”

The institute, now in its 10th year at SU, conducts research on oral speech and writing of people who use the method; trains families and professionals to become facilitators; and educates the public through a quarterly newsletter, conferences, videotapes, and other informational materials. “This is an exciting time in the field because some of these individuals, who previously were thought to be severely retarded, are now typing independently,” Biklen says. “For the first time ever, we are learning how they experience their autism. You’ll find that there are still huge debates about whether this method is viable. But, of course, once you have people typing independently, the debate is over—at least for them.”

By summer’s end, Biklen expects to finish editing a book of autobiographical essays written by people with autism, including one by Rubin, who share what their lives were like before they could communicate independently. Rubin and Biklen, who have known each other for more than a decade, recently teamed up to write an article for the British journal *Disability and Society* and give presentations on facilitated communication at national conferences.

Biklen admits he was skeptical about Rubin’s abilities when he first observed her attempting to type. “There’s no way I could have proven that she was the one who was doing the typing,” he says. “But certainly when she began to type independently, there was no question. That’s one of the challenges as an educator—not knowing what will come of your efforts. You don’t know who will be a poet, who will be a mathematician. But you have to begin with the presumption that each student has the potential to accomplish great things.”

Trustee Professor of Education and Psychology Benita Blachman researches early literacy acquisition and describes the potential within every student in more scientific terms. Blachman, who was the director of the graduate program in learning disabilities for 22 years, has unlocked the mysteries of reading for many young children who have been labeled learning disabled. Backed by a five-year grant from the National Institutes of Health, Blachman is working with colleagues at Yale Medical School, Haskins Laboratories, and the University of Texas-Houston Health Science Center to study whether intensive reading intervention can change patterns of brain activation in young struggling readers. Through her work, she has learned that many children have trouble reading because they experience difficulty breaking apart the sounds of spoken words. She works with children to help them understand the phonological structure of words and how this structure is represented in an alphabetic writing system.

Before she begins work with students, Blachman sends them to the Yale Center for the Study of Learning and Attention for a functional MRI (fMRI), which shows patterns of brain activity as the children perform simple reading tasks. She tutors the students for a year, then sends them back to Yale for another fMRI to see how their brain patterns change as the children learn to read. “Our results are very exciting,” Blachman says. “Not only have our struggling readers made significant progress in learning to read, write, and spell, but preliminary fMRI results indicate that, after intensive instruction, patterns of brain activation begin to look more like those seen in children without reading difficulties. This is further confirmation of the power of good, scientifically based teaching.”

While some School of Education faculty members strive to improve people’s mental capabilities, researchers in the school’s Department of Exercise Science study ways to enhance the overall health of people with disabilities. The researchers believe people with disabilities can train their bodies to become stronger and healthier by using the latest technology and equipment. Currently, exercise science professors are engaged in several research projects that seek to understand disabilities as they relate to physical exertion and daily activities. Through physiological and rehabilitative studies, they hope to identify ways to increase independence and improve quality of life. “The University has supported our department over the years in terms of developing our laboratories,” says Professor Bo Fernhall, chair of the exercise science department. “Having state-of-the-art laboratories enables us to do good research.”

The quality of the labs and the department’s commitment to physiological research grabbed doctoral student Tracy Baynard’s attention as she shopped for the right graduate school. “This is definitely one of the stronger labs in the country,” Baynard says. “The faculty here challenge each student to think about new things. Students have many opportunities to research a topic they find interesting.” In its Academic Plan, the University identifies such collaborative research opportunities for students as an integral part of ensuring greater student success.

Baynard is one of several students working with Fernhall on a project examining the cardiovascular fitness of people with Down syndrome. They’re currently collecting data on the heart rate and blood pressure of subjects with Down syndrome through a series of physical and laboratory tests. “We know from research that their heart rates do not go as high during exercise as the
heart rates of people without Down syndrome,” Fernhall says. “That limits how much blood they can distribute to their working muscles. With less blood and oxygen to their muscles, they can’t do as much physically as someone else.”

Fernhall notes that since many people with Down syndrome work in manual jobs, low cardiovascular fitness, especially as they age, can hinder productivity, possibly resulting in the loss of their jobs. It can also limit recreational activities. The researchers hope to identify what causes the low cardiovascular fitness in people with Down syndrome and subsequently create an exercise program to correct the problem.

Pediatric exercise physiologist Viswanath Unnithan, a fellow of the College of American Sports Medicine, is testing equipment that may help children with cerebral palsy build their muscles so the equipment that may help children with cerebral palsy build their muscles so they can walk more independently. These children, who can only walk with support from forearm crutches, are trying out a treadmill that partially supports the weight of their bodies with a harness system. The harness system carries a percentage of the child’s weight, and as the child develops stronger muscles, the weight is distributed from the harness to the child in small increments until he or she can support his or her full weight. “If the treadmill can do that, then there could be some far-reaching benefits for the children,” says Unnithan, who splits his time between the SU exercise science department and SUNY Upstate Medical University. “They will use less energy, so they won’t fatigue as much. And if they don’t fatigue as much, they’ll accomplish more.”

Training Tomorrow’s Teachers

The lives of people with disabilities have improved tremendously since Burton Blatt first published his exposé on America’s institutions for the mentally retarded and founded the Center on Human Policy. No longer are people with disabilities summarily committed to life in an institution. Many hold jobs and contribute to society. Today, people with disabilities are guaranteed access to public buildings, services, schools, and employment opportunities through such federal legislation as the Americans with Disabilities Act. But as society learns to value people with disabilities, Syracuse University’s rich resources and its leadership in the field are needed more than ever.

School districts, community agencies, businesses, and policy makers turn to the School of Education’s expertise to find the best ways of including people with disabilities in their programs, as required under state and federal laws. For example, teaching and leadership professor Gerald Mager received a $1 million grant from the New York State Department of Education to infuse SU’s inclusive education curriculum into teacher preparation programs at dozens of universities across the state. Backed by a three-year grant from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, School of Education professor Dennis Gilbride helps employers fill jobs that may appeal to people with disabilities. Gilbride, who coordinates SU’s Rehabilitative Counseling Program, also assists employers with adapting the workplace to accommodate these workers.

As the national trend toward inclusion extends into all realms, SU graduates find their skills highly marketable in school districts and government and community agencies. Recruiters come from as far away as Hawaii and California to hire SU seniors completing teacher preparation programs. Nearly 100 percent of the school’s spring graduates find jobs in their field by fall, Smith says. Those graduates arguably will have the most significant impact on changing society’s views of people with disabilities when they leave the Hill to teach others across the nation what they have learned. “Our students are exposed to the latest thinking and theories in the field, and they take that with them,” Biklen says.

Doctoral student Michael Schwartz hopes to be one of those alumni who will create a new level of equality for people with disabilities. He wants people to realize that equal access means more than just installing ramps or creating Braille signs. “I want to stress the importance of moving beyond compliance,” he says. “This means broadening the conceptualization of disability as merely a legal issue. The law then becomes a starting point for discussion. The emphasis is on finding ways to expand and enhance inclusion because of its inherent value to the community.”