

School reform has a new champion

Island girl helps pioneer national wave called 'inclusion'

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During her first nine years of life, Jackie Goepel never made a friend. She never uttered a word.

Now the 10-year-old has a best friend. And when Jackie sees her in the hallway, she lets out a shriek so shrill that teachers dart out of their classrooms to investigate.

Cerebral palsy and profound mental retardation robbed Jackie of the ability to walk and talk. Her early years were confined to a special education class at PS 37, with two other children in wheel chairs and 11 professionals.

That all changed last January when Jackie was wheeled into PS 52 in Dongan Hills. A disabled girl in a "typical" fourth-grade class, Jackie became a pioneer in a national wave of school reform known as "inclusion."

In inclusive classrooms, students with and

without disabilities learn together.

How Jackie took a seat among her peers is the story of a determined mother and a reluctant school system. It's a tale of a little girl's struggle to communicate and the children who understood her.

Jackie Goepel was born in June 1984 in St. Vincent's Medical Center. Her mother, Marie, worried about Jackie, who vomited after every breast feeding, and was unable to hold up her head.

But Mrs. Goepel, a licensed trauma nurse, couldn't find a doctor who would agree that something was wrong. "Her pediatrician wouldn't get on the phone with me, so I'd bring him her stretchies that were soaking with vomit to try and convince him," she said.

Jackie was three months old when Mrs.

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