Through a unique partnership of the Catskill Center for Independence and Riverside School, third-graders in Oneonta, New York, experience one school day while in a wheelchair. Students must navigate an environment that is neither designed nor maintained to meet their needs. This interdisciplinary experience forces students to confront challenges they do not anticipate. As a result of this meaningful (and temporary) encounter with a disability, students become aware of accessibility and accommodation issues and vocal about changes in their school. This social justice endeavor has led to widespread system changes that are evident throughout the school.

The catalyst for change came when students and staff discovered that our school psychologist was struggling to navigate the obstacle course our building had become. A recent amputee, she relied on a scooter for mobility and access to students, classrooms, and facilities. Watching her struggle to maneuver around and between barriers ushered in a new consciousness about accessibility in our building.

As a teacher, I wondered how I would fulfill my responsibilities effectively from the confines of a wheelchair. I also wondered how students would respond if given the opportunity to experience a temporarily disability. With these simple questions as my guide, I designed a disability awareness unit for my third-grade students. The unit called for both students and teachers to spend one school day in a wheelchair following a structured plan that would serve to standardize the experience. Students would stay in wheelchairs from the moment they arrived in school until the bell rang at 3:00. The only time a student could leave the wheelchair was after successfully entering a wheelchair accessible bathroom. In a building with over sixteen bathrooms, only one would be available to our students. There were clearly going to be challenges for the children (and participating teachers) to overcome. Three wheelchairs, two child-size wheelchairs and one adult wheelchair for school staff, were provided for the unit by the Catskill Center for Independence.

At the start of the unit, important vocabulary words such as disability, accessibility, accommodation, and independence were introduced to the students and they were encouraged to use them in speaking and writing throughout the experience. A pre-wheelchair writing assignment captured students’ feelings and opinions about being disabled before actually starting the project. A student log served both as a contract (it reminded students of the seriousness of this endeavor) and a journal to record their reactions to their day in the wheelchair. Their responses to sixteen questions were later used to write a personal narrative that documented each student’s experience. A key component of the student log was the “Task List” which provided students with critical challenges that a wheelchair user would face in a typical day such as opening doors, entering a bathroom, using a water fountain, accessing a window, or ascending a ramp.

As students traveled the building, they discovered many of the daily challenges people with disabilities face. Their frustration with heavy doors, the inability to enter or exit the building without assistance, knuckle-scraping narrow doorways, struggles to cross a snow-covered walkway, and an impossible cafeteria setting, all gave them new perspectives on disabilities. During the three-week experience, we had not only 32 students in wheelchairs, but three teachers and the school principal as well.

Sharing Experiences
An important part of this project was the opportunity for students to share what they experienced with others. Third-graders were equipped with digital cameras and camcorders to record footage daily. After all of the third-graders had their turn in a wheelchair and behind the lens, the students worked with the school librarian to make a “day in the life” film. Narration was provided by the students using comments they had written in their essays.

Some of the problems encountered by students were fairly predictable. “It was impossible to pick a pencil off the floor,” wrote Jasmine. Recess was challenging, too. Ari complained, “I could not go through the snow with my friends because it was too deep.” During a special movie day, Tommy protested: “I felt left out by having to sit in the wheelchair while other kids were lying on blankets on the floor.” Classroom accessibility posed problems for all the students. The seating arrangement and access to one’s own desk were both difficult. Some students wished for taller or wider desks, while others suggested a
horseshoe seating arrangement for easier access. Leah offere

minimum permitted. Two other research teams investigated

When the students met to share their door pressure results, there was a quiet but palpable disgust among the group. Everyone understood that our guest, and any other individual with a disability, would struggle with the doors in our building. The students discussed their options. Some wanted to picket at the district office while others recommended writing letters to the president, governor, or mayor. After some debate, we began with our principal. She advised us to contact our school district’s deputy superintendent. Two students wrote him a letter and he agreed to visit us. During his visit, the students explained the seriousness of the issue, presented our data, and requested an action plan to remedy the violations. He thanked us for our efforts and pledged to take our data to the district’s architect and get back to us in three weeks.

The students’ focus next turned to illegal parking in the school’s designated accessible parking spaces (“handicapped parking”). Unfortunately for those drivers who lacked permits, the spaces were in direct view of our classrooms and the eyes of the third-graders were always upon them. We added a Riverside Cares parking ticket to our arsenal of compliance strategies. Drivers who used these spaces without a visible permit were given a red Riverside Cares “ticket” which informed them that they were parked illegally, their license plate was recorded, and if they parked there a second time, they would be reported to the police. It became common in our classroom to hear, “Mr. Sider! Look! Someone is parking without a permit! Get a ticket!” Our first serial offender was FedEx. The driver of the FedEx truck was asked not to park in the designated spaces, but he continued anyway. The kids hung large handmade signs with bold crayon print that read: FedEx, NO PARKING. These bright white signs, lashed to the pole with blaze red yarn, did the trick.

Realizing the only remedies to render the heavy front doors accessible would be automatic door openers or a call button, teams set out to gather prices and information for both solutions. A call to The Imperial Door Company in Tonawanda, New York, provided price, installation fees, warranty period, and information about service contracts, while inquiries at
local hardware stores provided us with prices for battery powered doorbells.

When the assistant superintendent met with students again, he explained interior doors were required to meet the ADAAG standards and the work would be done. However, the specifications on the exterior doors were merely suggestions. Students still wanted to take action to make the front doors accessible. They decided to raise money to buy their own call button. The prices we researched ranged from $12.00 to $40.00. Students did work in teachers’ classrooms in exchange for a $1.00 donation to our cause. When our workday ended, we earned a total of $55.00. It was enough money to help all visitors enter our school. We later learned the school would be able to provide the buttons so the money raised by the students was used to hang new signs at the designated parking spaces.

Impact of the Project

This project began with a simple consciousness-raising goal in mind. Many of the children were excited to have their turn in the wheelchair and expected to enjoy a day of freewheeling fun. But for most, it actually turned out to be a day of hardships and physical discomfort. I will remember the looks on the faces of the students who, despite all their might and determination, could not exit through the main doors of the school. I will remember my days in the wheelchair; the cold I felt in my legs and feet, a kind of cold I had never experienced before. Writing on the board was nearly impossible due to a limited reach and rolling wheels. With wheels unlocked, the wheelchair rolled as I pressed chalk against slate.

The biggest thing we noticed is the higher level of awareness in the entire building. One of our proudest moments occurred during what was supposed to be an exciting, democratic, school-wide vote for new playground equipment. Catalogs were distributed to all classes and votes were to be tallied to choose the winning structure. As we were sitting on the classroom rug prioritizing our choices, a voice rang out. “Hey! A kid in a wheelchair couldn’t get on this equipment!” The kids quickly reorganized the choices into two piles; those that were wheelchair accessible and those that were not. The principal was summoned and the problem explained. The class was assured that any play structure chosen would have to be wheelchair accessible and that, in fact, the item they liked best was already known to be accessible.