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author. But instead, the girl was picked to be part of the audience.

Eager participants
The students in the "audience" would have to provide questions to ask the "author," Benglian explained. All the questions had to be based on the book they just finished.

Again, Lisa raised her hand. She had a question to ask.
That kind of no-big-deal participation by SXI students in other classrooms is what the program is all about.

"We don't even call it mainstreaming," said Underys, in his 10th year of teaching the program at Grace and recently honored as Farmington Public Schools' Elementary School Teacher of the Year. "We think of it as inclusion. We feel we are part of the mainstream. Our goal is to have kids feel they're part of the room and not just visitors."

The program includes youngsters from several school districts, who share per-pupil costs with the state, Underys said. SXI students attend general education classrooms in the morning and then participate in physical, speech and occupational therapy sessions during the afternoon.

There also are regular field trips, such as a recent junket to Country Lanes in Farmington Hills for ramp bowling.

The SXI students (who have

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*Lisa Tocco
—Paraprofessional*

more than one physical impairment) are welcomed as part of the group. Not only do general education students learn to not form stereotypes, learning becomes easier for the impaired kids, who have some hurdles to clear to relax and start to feel better about themselves, Underys said.

Underys values the way youngsters with a wide variety of physical and mental needs progress because of that approach. He can't help but hold back when talking about Jonathan.

"Jonathan wasn't talking a couple years ago when he came here," Underys said. "Now, he's telling jokes. He came out of his shell."

Linda Hildinger, a SXI paraprofessional in Jonathan's classroom, sees nothing but good things coming out of the inclu-

sion model.

"It's good for the other kids and good for our (SXI) kids," Hildinger said. "And Jonathan, he's ready. He's doing the math just like the regular kids are, and he gets a lot of socialization with the other kids."

Unique program

Besides Benglian and Hildinger, helping Underys are classroom paraprofessionals Shatha Fatoohi and Lisa Tocco.

"I've been here five months," Fatoohi said. "And this is the first time I've seen a program like this."

"We take the kids to regular classrooms and they learn a lot from other kids, feel part of the regular classrooms. They see a lot, they learn a lot."

Tocco said the inclusion program is not just Underys' mission, it has become that of the entire school. Without minimizing the social and academic progress made by SXI students, she sees a benefit to society.

"It's about not being afraid of children with special needs," Tocco said. "A lot of times in the shopping malls, the grocery stores, adults sometimes are afraid to get close to the child."

Teachers Denise Gundie-White and Fay Stone agreed that programs such as the one at William Grace will stretch the fabric of acceptance.

"I just find that once the kids



PHOTO BY ELIZABETH CALDWELL

Get ready: Helen Currie (at left) from the American Legion Auxiliary helps 9-year-old Stephen Das prepare to bowl. Also assisting Stephen are his mom, Carolyn, and 5-year-old brother, Michael.

look at the (SXI) child as a person, that's where the relationship starts," said Gundie-White, a third-grade teacher.

Stone, who teaches fourth grade, is optimistic that when today's elementary school students are adults, they will lead a world where "everybody is valu-

able, everybody has a place and has something to contribute. What we're doing here is recognizing the strengths and dealing with the weaknesses, and working as a team."

That team includes SXI students. It doesn't matter whether they use wheelchairs. When they

make their way down the hallways at William Grace, they exchange hellos with their new friends and teachers.

"I've seen growth," said Underys, probably not limiting that statement to the progress made by his eight special kids.

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