

New laws give parents a say in keeping twins together in school

By Michael Dang

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Like many parents, Carla and George Kordek in Plant City, Fla., wanted to make sure that their fraternal twin daughters, Emma and Nicole, had a smooth transition to kindergarten last fall. But before school was set to begin the girls were assigned to different classrooms, owing to an unwritten school policy to keep twins separate.

The Kordeks feared that their daughters would have a hard time adjusting to being separated for the first time in their lives. To bolster their argument, the parents gained the support of their daughters' pediatrician and the school's psychologist, who both agreed with research showing the detrimental effects of separating twins through arbitrary school policies.

When the school insisted on keeping the twins apart, they appealed to an assistant superintendent, who also happened to be the father of twins--and who granted their request last summer, one month before the start of school.

The Kordeks are now on a crusade to introduce a bill to the state Legislature that would respect the rights of parents to choose the classroom placement of their multiple-birth children.

"Even though I did have a happy ending," Carla Kordek said, "I am personally committed to seeing this through in Florida and helping other parents of multiples."

Such a measure, and others like it, could conceivably have an impact on many families. A 2003 report from the National Center for Health Statistics showed that the number of twin births has climbed by 75 percent, to 136,328, since 1980. As the number of multiple births increase, so are the conflicts that parents face in trying to keep their twins or triplets in the same classroom.



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After discovering that her two-year-old fraternal twins Sophie (left) and Joshua (right) may be separated into different classrooms by the time they reach kindergarten, Julie Robinson decided to spearhead a twins bill in her home state of Texas. (Courtesy of Julie Robinson)



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Pictured clockwise: Kathy Dolan, her sons Ryan and Nicholas, and her husband Vic Caracciola. Ms. Dolan decided to start the Web site [twinslaw.com](#) last year after she fought to place her twins in the same classroom for kindergarten and first grade. (Courtesy of Kathy Dolan)

Although some school districts allow parents a say in how twins are placed, other schools in the same state will place twins in separate classrooms without consulting parents.

In Minnesota, Wendy Haavisto went to her boss, state Sen. Dennis Fredrickson, for help after she discovered that her fraternal twin children, Nicholas and Victoria, would be separated in the first grade. The school insisted on the separation even after it agreed to place them together, Haavisto said.

“My husband was livid,” she said. “The school’s argument was that it would be better for their development, which has been unproven and was based on no research. We had just moved into a new house, the twins had gone into a new day care, and with all this trauma the twins needed to rely on each other.”

Fredrickson, himself a father of fraternal twins, sponsored a state bill that would give parents a say in their children's classroom placement. The bill quickly passed, making Minnesota the first state to enact such a law. Oklahoma and Illinois have since passed similar laws since. A similar resolution in Texas has just passed in the state’s House of Representatives.

Kathy Dolan, a mother of identical twin boys in Queens, N.Y., decided to start the Web site twinslaw.com last year after she fought to place her twins in the same classroom for kindergarten and first grade. On her Web site, she lists 16 states that are currently considering legislation on twins. Of those 16, only eight states have bills that are sponsored by lawmakers.

“It’s not about keeping kids together, it’s about choice,” said Dolan, whose New York bill is working its way through the state Assembly. “I think parents should be able to make this decision because they’re the ones who know their children best.”

Julie Robinson, a mother of 2-year-old fraternal twins in Austin, Texas, came across Dolan’s Web site and decided to spearhead the campaign for a state bill that would ensure that her twins would not have to be separated when they started their first day of school.

“I wanted to help not only my kids, but the parents of all multiples who would be going through the same problem,” she said.

A 2003 study by researchers at the Institute of Psychiatry at Kings College in London and the University of Wisconsin at Madison found that some separated twins experienced more anxiety and poorer reading performance compared with those not separated.

“This does not mean that all twins who are separated will experience significant and long-lasting problems,” the study said, “but it does indicate that some twins who experience anxiety on first separation at school will continue to have problems as they develop.”



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Pictured from right to left: Kathy Dolan, her sons Ryan and Nicholas, and her husband Vic Caracciola. Ms. Dolan decided to start the Web site twinslaw.com last year after she fought to place her twins in the same classroom for kindergarten and first grade. (Courtesy of Kathy Dolan)

Not all parents feel the need to place their children together. Chiquitta Nash, the mother of 5-year-old fraternal twin boys in Valrico, Fla., decided to separate her twins after they told her they wanted to be in different classrooms.

“Secretly, I wanted to see how they would thrive apart and granted their request,” she said.

The unwritten policy of separating twins in schools is based on the belief that separation will allow the children to develop individually.

“This is not a research-based policy,” said Nancy Segal, a professor of psychology at the Twins Studies Center at California State University at Fullerton and the author of “Indivisible by Two: Lives of Extraordinary Twins.” “Forcing two children to separate so that they will ‘adjust better’ is really unfair and is a traumatic imposition. Many schools are doing this without even asking the parents.”

“I’ve talked to heads of school districts, principals, psychologists and no one has any record of where these rules came from,” said Susan J. Alt, editor in chief of Twins magazine. Alt said that parents and teachers should work as a team to decide when twins are ready to separate from one another.

Susan B. Anthony Elementary School in Westminster, Calif., separates some twins and keeps others together.

“There are some twins that do well if they are separated into other classrooms and some twins that don’t,” said Linda Lewis, an administrator at the school. “But we do try to work with parents to come up with the best resolution.”

When Nicholas and Victoria Haavisto were separated in the first grade, Nicholas began disrupting the class because he missed his sister. Victoria also came home from school crying because she missed her brother. Both are now in the same classroom in the third grade and thriving in the school’s gifted and talented program, their mother said.

The Kordek twins, Emma and Nicole, sit in different parts of the classroom and even at different tables during lunch. Carla Kordek says that each child has done well in the same classroom because of the comfort of knowing that her twin is close by.

For Josh and Morgan Stone, 29-year-old identical twin brothers who grew up Fort Bragg, Calif., separation had a big impact. They were placed together and apart throughout elementary school. Then, a testing mistake placed the brothers at different learning levels in the seventh grade.

“I was placed in a special class while my brother was placed in the regular classes,” Josh said. “I consider that separation a turning point in my life because my academic career fell hard and I eventually graduated with a C average. I think that if my brother and I were together, then things would have been entirely different.”

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