

STATEN ISLAND, N. Y., WEDNESDAY, APRIL 21, 1954

Willowbrook School Census to Be Boosted to 4,500

\$5,750,000 Building Plans Under Study

State mental hygiene officials at Willowbrook State School today were studying what are expected to be final plans for a \$5,757,000 expansion program which eventually will boost the school's patient census to well over 4,500.

Dr. Harold H. Berman, director of the school, who has been conferring with officials in Albany over a two-year period during which plans for six new buildings and a laundry wing have been developed, said the plans were forwarded to him from Albany yesterday.

Willowbrook's director said it will be several weeks before he and other officials will be ready to approve the plans or recommend new changes. No date has been set for a start in actual construction.

Six New Buildings

The expansion program will feature construction of six modern infirmary-type buildings, plans for which have been in the making since \$5,000,000 was appropriated for the purpose in 1952. An additional appropriation last month provided \$750,000 for a laundry extension and \$57,000 was set aside to meet a boost in power requirements.

Willowbrook's present patient census is 3,700, and it operates with a staff of more than 950, according to Dr. Berman.

The school director announced, at the same time, that a proposed program of experimental classes for children who are severely mentally retarded will include two classes to be set up at Willowbrook.

Backed by Governor

Governor Dewey last month backed the project, asking an appropriation of \$50,000 for the work. In addition to the two classes to be set up at Willowbrook, three would be established at Letchworth Village, Thiells, N.Y., Dr. Berman said.

Recommendations for the program stem from an advisory committee to the Mental Health Commission. The groundwork of the recommendations was laid by a study made for the commission by the department of special education of Teachers College of Columbia University.

Dr. Berman said classes similar to those which would be put into effect under the program have been under way at Willowbrook for the past several years, and that the project will be enlarged next fall.

Willowbrook Director Cites Education Role

Willowbrook State School has disproved the belief that great numbers of the mentally retarded are "non-educational," Dr. Harold H. Berman, the school's director, declared yesterday at a meeting of the Staten Island Rotary Club.

Dr. Berman said the belief had long been held in the field of mental hygiene that many children, particularly those with IQ's at what had been termed a "basic level" of 50, could not assimilate any sort of teaching.

"The success of Willowbrook in working with children whose IQ's are as low as 18 has thrown this idea into utter discard," Dr. Berman said.

Bedridden now Walk

"The ability of the individual to adjust and adapt to his environment is utterly remarkable," Dr. Berman continued. "Many formerly believed to be permanently bedridden have been taught to walk. . . We have a school band made up of boys, some of them with IQ's ranging down to 18 and 20."

He said this attests to the "amazing results" of the school's program, which is based on the belief that every person has potentialities which can be developed to the fullest under proper conditions.

Dr. Berman said research within the state Department of Mental Hygiene already has labeled as in error, formerly-held notions that mental deficiency was hereditary. Causes may range in the field of disease, stresses and emotional factors, although possible causes still are being studied.

He emphasized that mental illness and deficiency are medical problems and treatment should be supervised by authorized psychiatrists. In this, he said, he adheres to principles set forth by the American Psychiatric Association.

Dr. Berman was introduced by Charles J. Bartels, program chairman for April. Roswell S. Coles, a past president of the club, presided at the session in the Meurot Club.