

# Where school and life are now a little brighter

By MAXINE SITTS

Sunlight streams in from dozens of skylights. Snowmen smile down from windows and walls.

Bright orange and red beams contrast sharply with the clean, white curved roof.

From classrooms which line the long corridors come sounds of laughter, talking and children's songs.

The place is the brand new "intensive therapy center for infants" at Willowbrook State School.

Costing \$1.2 million, and filled with over \$100,000 worth of equipment, the learning center is the only one of its kind at a New York State residential facility for the retarded.

It's called a "high school" by those who go there — retarded tots 2 to 7 years of age.

The 40-room building is new; but the theory behind it is not. Start early with the training and education of mentally retarded children, increase the chance for turning them into self-sufficient adults.

Until two months ago, Willowbrook personnel were training preschoolers in closets, reception rooms and hallways, in any building where they could find available space.

They knew that early training paid off. Children put on a regular educational pattern at 2 years of age progressed far ahead of what personnel had expected. Before the program, education began at 7—valuable

years of a child's life had been wasted, the staff found out.

The years of makeshift facilities are over now; and 400 children with an assortment of mental and physical handicaps are based at the new therapy building, proudly named a "high school" by veteran students.

Learning is a slow process in the new center. "If there's a measurable gain over three months in a 12-month period, that's real progress," remarked Dr. Jack Hammond, director of Willowbrook.

But the lack of day-to-day improvement does not affect the enthusiasm and dedication of the personnel who train the youngsters—as a visit to the building soon shows.

Two large skylighted recreation rooms — their walls and windows lined with colorful animal pictures—are filled with bouncing, somersaulting, ball-throwing boys and girls.

A circle of child-size chairs—steps—a large activity mat—several balls and action toys are in use in each room.

Recreation includes singing, marching, finger games, all types of activities to "get kids moving and use up energy," noted one therapist.

In some 16 "education" rooms, each lighted by skylights, a preschool-kindergarten program is followed. Kids learn to communicate, to coordinate their hands through coloring and cutting.

In occupational therapy, housed in 10 more rooms, they learn coordination and dexterity, through an individual program worked out by a physician and occupational therapist.

Two soundproofed rooms are used for speech and hearing difficulties, and intensive work is done with the blind as well.

A physical therapy department has eight rooms of equipment where both active and passive exercises make the children more mobile. About half the 400 children at the center have some physical handicap.

Qualified personnel, in the form of occupational, recreational and physical therapists, nurses, teachers, physicians and psychiatrists, staff the center.

But the work being done there is being expanded to each children's building at Willowbrook, through ward and nursing personnel.

In an unusual move, Hammond has brought attendants and nurses from other buildings to the new center, to help with the programs and to learn themselves about new education techniques. The ward personnel, after several weeks, return to the other buildings, taking with them training skills.

They then work with youngsters not yet involved in the program as "motivators," which means a combination parent-nursery school teacher. Such work is often being done on a one-to-one ratio.

"We're making kids more responsive to their environment—to adults and to their peers," explained Hammond. "These kids would just sit there—dull, not aware of their surroundings, not even aware of themselves. Now, you find them laughing and talking, running to the doorway to greet you when you come to their rooms."

Although completed in October, after a short 14 months of construction, the therapy center has still not had a cornerstone-laying ceremony



A smiling valentine winks at a SERVE volunteer and a youngster, as they stroll through the new brick building.

Advance  
February 2, 1969



Hand coordination is taught by Miss Ann Parisi, during an education session in the new therapy center.



A woman and two children are in a room, possibly a therapy room, with a wooden structure.