

State agency restores ousted 2

By JANE KURTIN

Speculations that Dr. Michael Wilkins and Mrs. Elizabeth Lee were fired from their jobs at Willowbrook State School solely because of their differences with the administrator, were confirmed yesterday when the two were put back on the payroll.

Although they have not been given back their jobs, Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee have reportedly been offered positions "elsewhere in the State Department of Mental Hygiene" by Dr. Frederic Grunberg, deputy commissioner.

Max Schneier, president of the Federation of Parents Organizations for the New York State Mental Institutions, said that he was assured by Dr. Grunberg that Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee have "excellent qualifications" and that "it was not their capabilities which are questioned but rather their ability to work with the administration of the institution."

"I replied to Dr. Grunberg," Schneier said, "that conversely it was also Dr. Hammond's

(director of Willowbrook) ability to work with his employees which fell under question."

Dr. Grunberg, reached yesterday at his home in Albany, refused to comment on the possibility of reinstating Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee to their jobs "until I have a chance to talk with them."

"I have offered Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee to meet with me tomorrow to review the situation at Willowbrook and their futures with the State Department of Mental Hygiene," Grunberg said.

Schneier, who promised last week that the Federation and the Benevolent Society of Willowbrook State School will demand the reinstatement of the two outspoken employees, still holds the same line.

"We are standing firm," he said, "and we expect the reinstatement of these people and if necessary an open hearing on the reasons for their dismissals."

Dr. Hammond maintained that Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee "had not been removed from the payroll" despite the un-

conditional dismissal notices they received four hours before their terminations became effective.

"They were not removed," Dr. Hammond said, "in order to maintain some cushion for consideration."

Asked to comment on whose decision it was to keep the cushion, Dr. Hammond replied: "No comment!"

Explaining that both workers had passed civil service examinations qualifying them for permanent status at the institution, Dr. Hammond said it

was time "to decide whether individuals of this type are wanted on the staff."

"Because of their incompatibility with the administration," Dr. Hammond said, "and many negative attitudes, I prefer not to make them permanent."

"This," Dr. Hammond said, "is similar to an employer deciding whether or not to hire a person after an interview." Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee have both worked at Willowbrook for more than a year as provisional employees.

Asked if he would reinstate Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee, Dr. Hammond responded that he would bow to the wishes of the higher officials in the State Department of Mental Hygiene.

"If I am ordered to reinstate them — and I have to work within the administrative framework and be responsive to the wishes of the commissioner — I would say that it is not the first time that a decision of mine has been reversed by the proper authority."

Dr. Hammond also expressed his feeling about demands put to him by the Benevolent Society that parents have a say in the hiring and firing of employees.

"As the laws exist now," Dr. Hammond said, "the decision-making process and the exercise of authority rests with the director of the institution."

"But if the law is changed, I am perfectly willing to share in the decision-making if the responsibility for the decisions is also shared."

Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee remained somewhat baffled and unimpressed with the offer of jobs elsewhere in the department and the promise that they are still going to get paid.

"It could mean two things," Dr. Wilkins said. "Either it could mean that this is a real commitment by the State and the Department of Mental Hygiene to provide services and dignity to the mentally retarded or it could be just an attempt to silence an embarrassing situation. I'll discuss what it means with Dr. Grunberg tomorrow."

"I think that most of us are cynical about promises made after exposes which embarrass the state and which are never fulfilled when the publicity dies down."

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Mrs. Lee, who said she has still not received permission from Dr. Hammond to explain the reason for her departure to the adolescent boys she's worked with, hesitated to comment on new developments surrounding her employment "because I have received no official word," she said.

"I hope," Mrs. Lee ventured, "that the decision to put me back on the payroll makes it clear that there was no reason to fire me in the first place.

"I want to work," Mrs. Lee continued, "and I feel that I am needed at Willowbrook and should be hired as a permanent employe.

"All of this," Mrs. Lee concluded, "convinces me even more that employes and parents must work together to improve the institution."