

Editorials

Patients come first

Students of government and community problems must find Staten Island a fascinating study hall these days.

There are continuing battles over zoning changes and the general pattern for Island development. There are specific battlegrounds, such as Miller Field and Willowbrook State School. A quick reading of the pages of the Advance for a single week indicates dozens of these issues, large and small. Any one of them challenges the skills and imagination of the best problem-solvers around.

Sometimes, in the heat of the battle, the main point of the issue at stake is lost. The situation at Willowbrook State School is perhaps a prime example of that.

Many weeks ago when the Advance started publishing stories about conditions at Willowbrook State School, a euphemism for an institution for the mentally retarded, we carefully put our emphasis on the essential point — that the institution was not being adequately staffed to provide adequate care for the patients.

It was quite apparent that the medical and other professional staffs, plus the loyal corps of attendants, were doing their very best under the circumstances. But there weren't enough of these people. The State Legislature had trimmed budget funds and the staffs were reduced to what many considered the danger point in patient care. In many areas the victims of budget cuts are quick to counterattack, but the mentally retarded patients were certainly not equipped to do so.

Fortunately, some ground has been gained in bolstering the staff at Willowbrook.

Unfortunately, the main issue has been obscured by personality conflicts, self-seekers and the sensationalists. All the characters in these by-plots have been quite obvious despite the heated tensions. The charges and counter-charges reach great lengths.

The goal of this newspaper remains the same as it was weeks ago — the proper care of the patients and not the personality conflicts and the gimmickers. The community must continue to work toward that end; generally it has been responding very well.