

Willowbrook Education in the City

by Felix Clarke

Editor's Note: Following is the start of part two of the Register's extended analysis of conditions at Willowbrook State School. This article and the supplements on page ten take a close look at what "School" there is at the institution.

ICE CREAM AND CAKE...
When the new buildings were constructed to handle the incoming babies at Willowbrook there were no room for classes. With over 6,000 residents at Willowbrook in 1964, newer wings were not added to the school building until Dr. Hammond became Director.

We can better understand the background of educational programs for the mentally retarded by noting that not until 1910, when the Binet-Simon method of intelligence testing was introduced, did the State take steps to create the State Schools and then not until 1911, Letchworth Village was built. Wassaic was not built until 1930. Willowbrook opened as a school in 1947, West Seneca in 1962 and finally Suffolk in 1965 with a total population (at all centers) in 1965, of over 25,000.

There are still no educators on the administrative staff of the department of mental hygiene and Willowbrook's top administration is without an educator in a policy position.

It was vividly pointed out on New York Illustrated (aired on February 29, 1972), that all the buildings at Willowbrook where residents are housed, excluding the new pre-fabs, are not designed with classrooms. The areas used in the basements of the buildings are converted isolation room, store-rooms and staff locker areas.

In the words of one teacher who worked with the babies before the construction of the modern intensive therapy complex was built, "for ten years we taught these children in isolation rooms, and any room that was available."

There is no "Education Department" within the department of mental hygiene. All educational guidelines and laws are handed down from the State Department of Education. One law which affects the retarded "students" of Willowbrook, is the requirement that any person reaching their 21st birthday, is dropped from the school.

Dr. Sternlight, chief of habilitation services, explains that Willowbrook must abide by this

law even though the student does not meet the mental age of 21. The State maintains that students over 21 should be directed towards vocational studies. The evening adult program at Willowbrook has an enrollment of 180 from a population of over 2,000 adult aged students.

On the charge that parents dump their children at places such as Willowbrook...and the counter-charge that there was no other place capable of dealing with their child...stands a mandate from the State Department of Education that "school districts maintain special classes with ten or more educable retardates and to maintain special classes for the trainable where eight or more reside within the district."

Right behind that mandate
the state says that "only 45% of the estimated number of children for whom special education is indicated are enrolled in public school programs."

A mother with a 15 year old son in Willowbrook sums it up with "I put him here because I wanted him to learn and they said that this is a school. Now he is out of school because he sang in class and reportedly disrupted the children. Where am I to turn? There is no other place for him to learn."

When discussing with Mrs. Glasser, Education Director at Willowbrook, the need for spending \$20,000 of federal money on bus trips rather than include such expenses in the state educational program, she claimed, "That is the ice cream and cake...they (the State) give you the bread and butter."

BREAD AND BUTTER... In our first article we introduced the opinion of an educator, Ernest Maddock, that educational programs in State institutions are token efforts...and mental hygiene departments are not responsible to educational departments.

The New York Department of Mental Hygiene somewhat substantiates this allegation and adds support to those critics who claim that Willowbrook is not a school in this "Comprehensive Plan" (Vol. 1, 1965).

"A program of educational research should be developed in the State Education Department to evaluate present offerings, initiate and test experimental program innovations and test the application of research in

the educational programs under various auspices for the mentally retarded in New York State." In other words, efforts in education are experimental and not part of the school's normal function.

Today, at Willowbrook, only two educational programs exist with specific goals. They are Title I for enrichment and the evening adult program for vocational training.

Mrs. Glasser's contention that every child who comes under the educable category is in school, has been vocally contested by parents, professionals and lay personnel.

"Space" says Mrs. Glasser, "that is a big problem. You have to service these youngsters. So in the basement of the buildings we have classrooms. They are nice classrooms, but our premise is to get the children out of the building."

With additional staff and space would you be able to add another 1,000 to the school population?

Mrs. Glasser: Well, let me say right now with the space I have I could not lift it any more. I could lift it maybe by 50. But I couldn't go over. Because if you teach a child, you must have a classroom and an adequate classroom."

So, is it correct to say that there are possibly another 200 to 300 children who could be educated?

Mrs. Glasser: If I had the staff.

Are they not being educated because of lack of staff and space?

Mrs. Glasser: Well, lack of space or lack of staff...If I had another school building I might be able to service more."

There were only 987 students in academic study during the month of February at Willowbrook. As of that time "student" enrollment at Willowbrook was 5,268.

Ernest Maddock, in his report stated: "It is alarming to realize that a program of such magnitude and expense has failed to inspire significant research effort, that there is such a paucity of reliable evidence available regarding the extent, degree, and effectiveness of administrative policies governing the implementation of educational programs in state operated school hospitals for the mentally retarded."

Such is the case at Willowbrook as evidenced in the hospital improvement and inten-

sive therapy programs. H.I.P. is an experiment to prove that all children are "reachable" and not an educational program. It is a federally funded "experiment" to prove the basic assumption of all schools—all children can learn.

Intensive therapy starts from scratch in teaching children basic self-help skills... "It is too early at this stage to tell if a child is educable or trainable," says Miss Hallorhan, educational supervisor.

Yet, in this program, 16 teachers and 16 teacher assistants are used...and the supervisor of the infant care unit says, "we work very hard with the children here, but after they leave here we don't know what happens."

Infant therapy can best be explained by drawing a parallel between this program and the pre-kindergarten program for the public schools. Pre-kindergarten is used to familiarize the student with what is expected of him when he starts school formally; what he will be learning and why... finally, it gives the teacher and parent an opportunity to evaluate the child's potential.

Infant therapy according to Miss Hallorhan prepares the retarded child, "enabling us to determine whether the student goes into the educable or trainable class."

We asked Mrs. Mason, supervising teacher for the Infant Therapy complex, what has to be done to prepare a child for school and what age group they draw from. "By law we are to start at age five, but we will put any child in the program who can benefit from it."

"We have 170 students in the program now (120 of them are non-verbal) - at this point she asks, "why if the state has a separate department for speech do we not have a full time speech teacher?" When she was asked if she ever had a speech teacher her reply was, "yes, one man who was only here on a part-time basis."

Now that admissions have stopped at Willowbrook it is easier for the observer to follow the progression of the young child who comes to the school as a baby and stays until the adult years are reached.

Infant therapy is the first step of the learning experience. Here they are taught to sit in a classroom, to stand at command, to walk up and down stairs. Mrs. Mason... "here in the institution a child may grow up and have never gone up or down a flight of stairs. We orientate them by actually using a model of a stairway."

"With the food in the institution a child may never get to see a banana with the skin on, so we bring in raw fruit, to let them