

Bad news is end of special program

By WILLIAM HUUS

Building 78 — a recent addition to Willowbrook State School built to facilitate a special program — has been shut down and state officials will not say when or if the unit will be reopened.

In operation for three years, Building 78 was a self-contained facility created to spur the development of educable mentally retarded youngsters. In its short history, it was applauded as the "country club of Willowbrook" and a "fantastic success."

Last Friday, allegedly with little advance notice for the youngsters' parents, the more than 80 residents housed in Building 78 were evacuated and the doors were locked. The reason, according to Willowbrook director Dr. Miodrag Ristich, was the unit's faulty heating system, a thorn in the building's side ever since it opened.

Despite agreement that the heating system is faulty, however, a stream of protest over the situation has begun to flow from parents of the residents involved and from the Benevolent Society for Retarded Children.

The dissidents claim the parents were not notified of the pending action to move their children, that the school officials have implied the facility will not be reopened and that state estimates for the repair cost far exceed what the actual cost would be.

Dr. Ristich said yesterday that it is a "very open situation" and that the administration has only decided the building "is not habitable now." He said an analysis of the repair work necessary will be made before a decision on the future of the building is made.

Building 78 was constructed as a "temporary" facility and its doors were opened early in 1971. The federal government agreed to subsidize the program at the facility on a short-term basis at a cost of \$100,000 a year, and the state paid the remaining costs. Next month the state was scheduled to assume all costs.

The unit contains an eight-classroom school, a cafeteria and four wards with colorful appointments. Each ward contains homelike divisions for two to eight children, and the building can house between 80 and 100 residents.

It was unlike any other facility at Willowbrook.

Teachers and recreation and speech therapists were able to work within the one building on a day-by-day basis with children with IQs in the 20s and 30s.

The results were heralded since youngsters learned how to feed, dress and groom themselves as well as improve their handling, talking and reading skills.

Through it all, however, the building's heater was a constant problem which worsened so much recently that the city Health Department inspected it and condemned the building for improper heat.

Thus, the decision was made to close the building. The staff was apparently notified about a week before the children left last Friday, but parents claim they were not told until that day or later.

One factor in the decision to close the unit is likely the amount which state engineers estimated the repair work would cost. Dr. Ristich confirmed that the state estimates ranged from \$168,000 to \$300,000.

Dr. Ristich said he and mental health officials in

Albany agreed to evaluate the status of the building in light of the cost involved and the possible time involved to make the repairs.

"If it was a relatively small amount and the repairs could be done in a matter of weeks, that would be one thing," he explained. "But if the cost was large and some time was involved, we felt we should consider if the money would be better spent elsewhere — such as improving one of the other buildings here."

The crux of the current controversy is the cost estimate and the benevolent society claims the state figures are way

out of line.

The society hired an Island heating agency, Brown's Fuel Service, to survey the heating system at the building.

After taking the survey, the firm sent the society a letter detailing the exact nature of the problem, the equipment that was at fault and the repair work necessary to make it operable again.

Brown's estimate for the en-repair project was \$16,400.

The society feels that the state must be balking at repairing the heater and reopening the building for some unknown reason.

Dr. Ristich, who was sent a copy of Brown's report by the society, said he intends to contact the firm and discuss the matter with a state architect who was scheduled to inspect the building today.

The director said a decision about the repair work may be made by next week.

Until, then, the former residents of Building 78 have been shifted to other facilities at Willowbrook and must do without their "country club."